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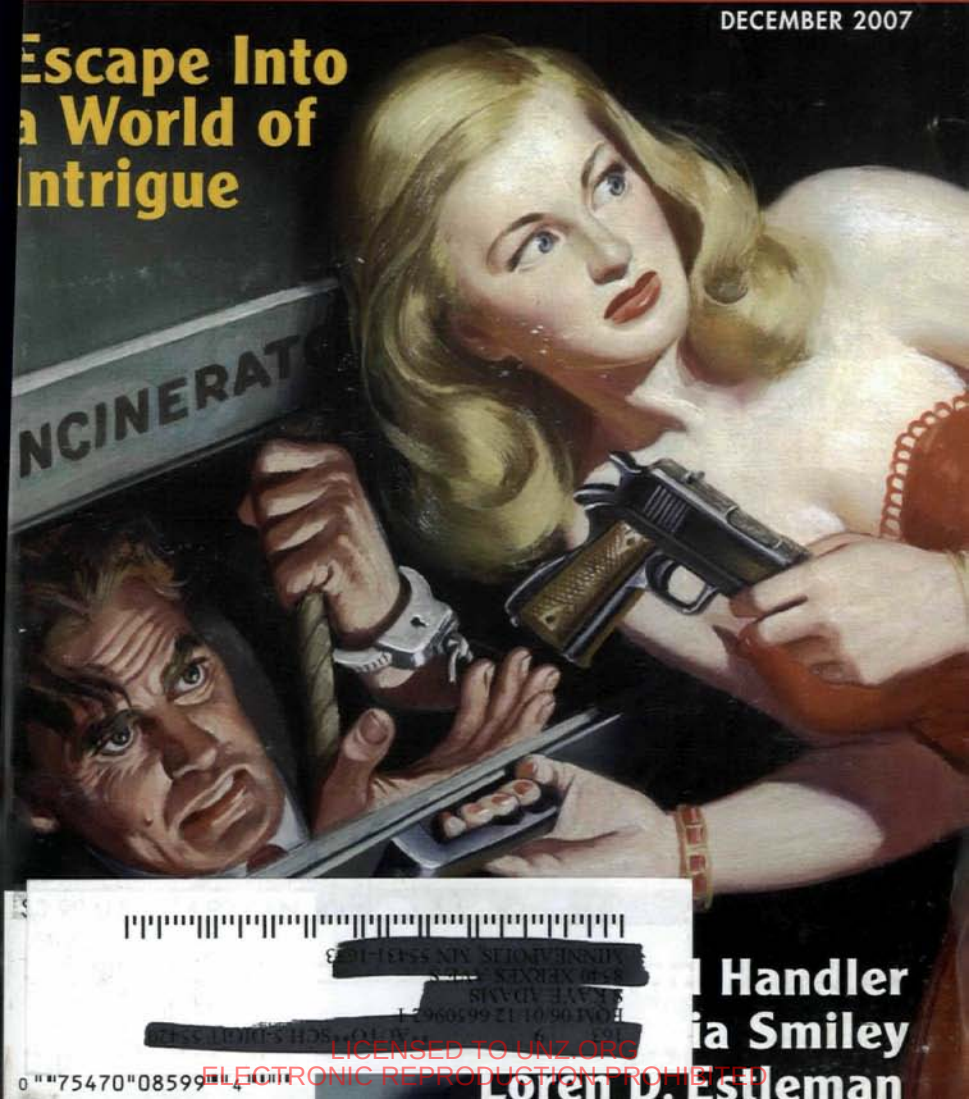

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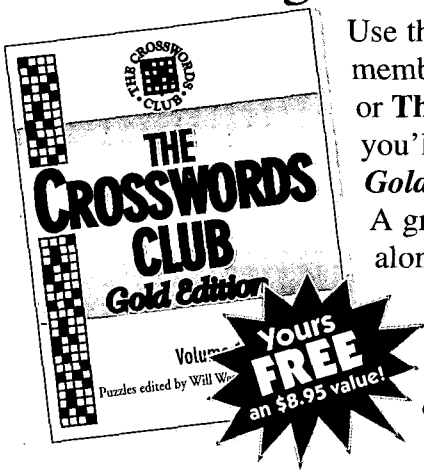

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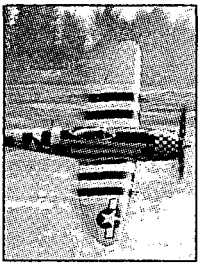

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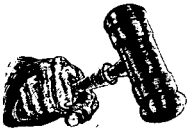

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THE MAN WHO COULDN'T MISS

by David Handler

Her voice on the phone was booming and authoritative, especially for five-thirty in the morning: "I'm trying to reach a Mr. Stewart Hoag."

"And you have."

"Sir, this is Sergeant Yolanda Snipes of the Connecticut State Police Major Crime Squad. Sorry to bother you at such an early hour. . . ."

"No problem. I was already up." Having just returned from Paris the day before and, unlike Merilee, wide awake since four. I'd changed our fourteen-month-old, Tracy, into a fresh blue summer onesy and brought her across the meadow to my writing room, where I was trying to decode the feverish scribblings that constituted my road map for Novel #4. Lulu, my basset hound, lay under my desk with her head on my foot. Tracy was on the rug next to her tugging on Lulu's big ears and giggling with fascinated delight. "How may I help you, Sergeant?"

"Your name has come up in connection with a criminal investi-

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gation. Are you acquainted with a Paul Romano? Paul John Romano?"

I searched my memory bank. My fallback second career as America's preeminent ghost-writer of celebrity memoirs had brought me into contact with numerous mega-stars and their hangers-on over the past decade, quite a few of them murderers. But none named Paul Romano. Paul John Romano. "Don't think so, why?"

"He listed you as a personal reference on a job application he filled out last month at B and B Building Supply in Dorset. The address he put down for you is on Joshua Town Road in Lyme. Is that correct?"

This new David Handler is the first short story to feature his series character Stewart Hoag. The first two "Hoagy" novels, *The Man Who Died Laughing* and *The Man Who Lived by Night,* were reissued by Busted Flush Press in an '06 omnibus, followed in '07 by an omnibus containing the third and fourth books, the Edgar winner *The Man Who Would Be F. Scott Fitzgerald* and *The Woman Who Fell From Grace.*

"It is." Beneath me, Tracy had shifted her attention from Lulu's ears to the only thing in the world that fascinated her more—her own toes. "And you say he listed *me?"*

"Were you ever contacted by the employer?"

"No, but I've been out of the country for several weeks." All thanks to Novel #3, my male menopause epic, which had stunned everyone—especially my publisher—by rocketing to the top of the best-seller lists. Even outselling my fabled first novel, *Our Family Enterprise,* the one that led *The New York Times Book Review* to crown me the "first major new literary voice of the 1980s." Filming of the big-screen version was under way in Paris, and the producers had flown me over to doctor the script, which meant me making suggestions and them ignoring them. But they'd put me up in a first-class hotel and paid me fifty thousand dollars, most of which I'd blown on clothes. "Did he give them this phone number?"

"He did. What's the significance of that?"

I didn't tell her that the line she'd reached me on was our un-listed business line. That there was absolutely no way someone I'd never heard of ought to have it. My many scrapes with the law had taught me not to volunteer anything. "Why are you looking for him?"

"Shortly after B and B hired him he took off with a truckload of building supplies worth a fortune. Since then, his face has popped up on numerous surveillance cameras—Mr. Romano is behind a series of late-night armed robberies of shoreline convenience stores. Five in the past two weeks. The most recent last night in Westbrook. This is a dangerous customer, Mr. Hoag. We want him off of the streets. If anything comes to you, please call me, okay?"

I went back to my scribblings. Or tried to. I kept asking myself why

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a man I'd never heard of—a wanted criminal, no less—had listed me as a reference on a job application. Baffled, I sat back in my chair and gazed out the window at the meadow grass that glistened with dew in the early light of dawn. The morning breeze off of Whalebone Cove was soft and cool. All was blissful and serene—until Tracy moved on from her toes to the buttons on her Busy Box. Which, to her great pleasure, made all sorts of loud noises when she pushed them. Ducks quacking. Bells ringing. Not the least bit distracting when Daddy was trying to think. She was a happy, sunny child. Beautiful, too, if you could get past the fact that she still seemed to possess an unusually large head. She had Merilee's emerald-green eyes. Merilee's luxuriant blond hair. Two, count 'em, two bottom teeth. And a one-word vocabulary—*annawoo,* which was Tracy-speak for Lulu.

We were spending the rest of the summer on our farm. It had eighteen acres in all. A center-chimney colonial built in 1736 with seven working fireplaces. A post-and-beam carriage barn of hand-hewn chestnut. The one-time chapel where I worked. A duck pond. Apple and pear orchards. Merilee's vegetable and herb gardens. Here on the farm, she wasn't the Oscar and Tony Award-winner Merilee Nash. She was just Merilee. The crusty locals never fussed over her. That would be unseemly. She'd be cruising into rehearsals for the new Mamet play in a few weeks. Me, I was grateful to be productive again after so many years in literary hell. The writer's block. The coke-fueled flame-out that had cost me Merilee. My descent into pen-for-hire hackdom. But I'd won Merilee back again after all of these years. Now there was Tracy. And the work. At long last, life was sweet.

Which should have been my first clue that something was about to go sour.

The phone rang again now. Sergeant Snipes, I assumed, calling to tell me it had all been some kind of misunderstanding.

"That you, Hoagy?" His voice was hoarse and unfamiliar.

"And you are . . . ?"

"Name's Romano, bro."

"Do I know you?"

His harsh laugh quickly morphed into a wet cough. "Let's say I know you, okay?"

"Not okay. What is it you want?"

"Not much. Some money is all."

"You just stole some last night, didn't you?"

"I already owed that to somebody who was about to break my legs." He sounded as if he was calling from a highway rest stop. I could hear trucks lurching into gear, cars screaming past. "I still need to get out of town fast. Mexico, maybe, because things are getting a little hot. Twenty-five thou ought to do. I know you can spare it. I'll call you back later with the where and when. And no games, bro. No troopers. Not if you value that happy home of yours. You do this for me and I'll be out of your hair forever."

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"I didn't realize you were in my hair."

"Oh, yeah, I'm good and there."

"How so? Why would I pay you that kind of money? Who are you?"

His reply was: "Ask the great big movie star."

"Merilee, who is Paul John Romano?"

By now we were putting away breakfast in our gallantly battered old farmhouse kitchen. A toasted baguette with homemade blackberry jam for me. Protein shake for Merilee. A tin of Nine Lives mackerel for Lulu, who has mighty strange eating habits and the breath to prove it. And a festive strained banana-orange medley for Tracy, which Merilee was spoon-feeding to her in her booster chair. So gifted was Merilee Nash at controlling her responses that her hand on the spoon wavered only fractionally at the mention of his name. I doubt that anyone would have even noticed it, but I'm not anyone.

She was officially forty now, yet had never looked lovelier. Not that Merilee had ever been conventionally pretty. Her jaw was too strong. Nose too long. Forehead too high. Plus, she was nearly six feet tall in her bare feet, broad shouldered and big boned. Right now, she had on a tank top and yoga pants, waist-length golden hair tied up in a topknot bun. Her personal ashtanga instructor, Kimberly, was due soon for her empowering ninety-minute session. I tried joining them once. Lasted eleven whole minutes.

"No one calls him Paul," she said finally, her happy mommy face never slipping as she fed Tracy. "He's always been P.J."

"Fine, now that we've got that cleared up, who is he?"

"Someone I knew way back when I was in New Haven."

"He was at Yale Drama School with you?" That his name rang no bells didn't necessarily mean anything. Plenty of people come out of prestigious programs like Yale and don't make it. Hell, most don't.

"Yes, he was. And we were . . . sweetness, *please!*" Tracy was sticking her fingers in her mouth and happily flinging her medley wherever it wanted to go. "That is to say, he and I went out for a while," she explained, coloring slightly.

"Is that all you two did?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Merilee, I don't own your past any more than you own mine. But the Major Crime Squad is after this guy and he seems to think he has something on you. Something that I should give him money to keep quiet about."

"How much more does he want?"

"Twenty-five thousand. And you just said the word 'more.' Have you been paying him off?"

Merilee nodded her head, swallowing. "He showed up here out of the blue the very morning you left. I swear, it was as if he'd been watching the house from . . ." She shot a gaze out the windows at

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the woods beyond the pond before turning back to me. "I hadn't seen him in more than fifteen years. He acted like it was last Tuesday. Flopped right down at this table, chattering nonstop, and waited for me to make him breakfast." Which explained how he'd come by our business phone—it was printed on a card stuck to the refrigerator door. "So I gave him some ham and eggs. And then I gave him ten thousand dollars."

"Why would you do that?"

"In the hope that he'd go away. But I—I . . ." She faltered, her face etching with concern. "I've just made a mess of things instead."

"Not necessarily. And don't furrow your brow that way or you'll get lines."

"Nobody gets those anymore, silly. That's why God invented Botox."

"So there's a God?"

"Of course there is. There has to be."

I got up and poured us more coffee. Lulu circled around three times under the table and curled up with a grunt. Tracy continued to sit in her chair waving her limbs and giggling. "You'd better tell me everything, Merilee."

She raised her chin at me, hands folded before her on the table. "Out of all of us who were there, P.J. was the one who had *it,*" she began quietly. "He was tall, dark, and incredibly handsome, with huge, soulful brown eyes. And so much raw animal intensity you couldn't take your eyes off of him when he was on stage. The man positively smoldered with bad-boy sex appeal. He was authentically street. Grew up in the Federal Hill section of Providence with small-time wise guys and hustlers. Honestly, Hoagy, I thought he'd be the next De Niro. Every single one of the girls got weak in the knees around him. And the actors all hated him. You wouldn't believe the envy."

"Sure, I would."

"As for me, I wanted to tame him," she recalled wistfully. "I couldn't, of course. He was unreliable. Unfaithful. Stoned half of the time. And in way over his head when it came to gambling. Betting money he didn't have on long shots that never came in. Always into a lot of rough characters for money—which he'd pay back by borrowing it from me. But I didn't care. He was so talented and beautiful and . . ." She lowered her gaze to her hands. "One night, a faculty member had a party for everyone at her place out in Stony Creek. P.J. borrowed his cousin Richie's Trans Am so we could go. It was a terrific evening. We laughed a lot. Drank a lot of wine. It was very late by the time he and I started back to New Haven. I quickly realized he was in no condition to drive. He'd snorted a ton of coke in the bathroom, which I hadn't been aware of until he started flying down these narrow, twisting country roads, going faster and faster. I begged him to pull over and let me drive. He just laughed and floored it. Until we came flying around a bend and he . . . we . . . hit a man, Hoagy. A poor fellow out walk-

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ing his dog along the shoulder of the road. I'll never forget the sound it . . ." She broke off, shuddering at the memory. "P.J. cursed and took off. I screamed at him to go back. He wouldn't. Because he was coked to the gills and because he hadn't exactly borrowed cousin Richie's car—he'd stolen it. I remember I kept screaming at him to let me out. Finally, he pulled over and I got out in the middle of nowhere. Walked the rest of the way home to my apartment. Ten miles at least."

"Did you call nine-one-one?"

Merilee closed her eyes before she shook her head. "I intended to, I swear. I even dialed the number from the first pay phone I came to. Only, I panicked and hung up. Next morning, it was on the local news that a prominent professor at the School of Architecture had been the victim of a late-night hit-and-run driver. A neighbor heard it happen and did call nine-one-one right away."

"Did the man survive?"

"He did not," she replied, her green eyes puddling. "P.J. killed him. *We* killed him."

"You weren't driving."

"I was there. I knew who was responsible. I could have given his family some comfort. Seen that justice was done. But to my great and enduring shame, I didn't. Too afraid of what would happen to me. So I kept quiet. And I've stayed quiet all of these years, Hoagy. Never told a soul."

"You could have told me."

"I was too ashamed. And I was hoping it was behind me. *P.J.* was behind me."

"What happened to him?"

"He self-destructed. Started getting work Off Broadway right away, but he kept showing up late for rehearsals. Didn't know his lines. Fought with directors. I'm talking punches thrown. He got himself dropped from three or four shows. Still, he was so gifted that Scorcese handed him a choice role in *Goodfellas*. Yet he managed to get himself fired from that, too. Drugs were involved, apparently. After that, he was done. P.J. Romano destroyed a can't-miss career, Hoagy. Single greatest waste of talent I've ever seen. The last I heard, he'd drifted back to the world of Federal Hill hoods he came from."

"Except now he's back in your life."

"And still betting the house on impossible long shots. Would you believe he asked me if I could get him in to read for the Mamet play? He hasn't been within ten miles of a workshop in God knows how long. He's strung out on crystal meth. Up to his eyeballs in drug debts, gambling debts. Looks *awful.*"

"Why has he shown up now?"

"Who knows why? Because he's desperate. Because he thinks I'm the last bargaining chip he has left. He said if I didn't pay him the ten thousand he'd tell the police *I* was driving the Trans Am that night."

"They won't believe him."

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"That doesn't matter, darling. His attorney will run straight to the media and the story will be all over the Internet within an hour. Any charge against someone like me, no matter how frivolous, leaves its mark. And this isn't frivolous. A man died. Let's face it, my reputation will be trashed." She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "It won't help yours any either."

"I don't care about that."

"Well, I do. You don't deserve to get dragged into this."

"I wonder why he used my name as a reference on that job application."

"So you'd ask me about him and it would stir up trouble between us. Along with all of the rest of his delusions, I'm quite convinced he's hoping to win me back."

"He says he wants to leave the country."

"P.J. says lots of things. Half of the time, he even believes them. But they're never true. He'll just keep coming back to us for more money until they catch him. And when they do I have no doubt he'll throw me to the wolves." She reached over and grabbed my hand, gripping it tightly. "Oh, Hoagy, what on earth are we going to do?"

"Maybe Tracy should stay with my parents for a couple of days," I suggested. They had a condo in a nearby assisted-living facility. "They have excellent security there. Mother will be tickled."

"Absolutely not. P.J. Romano is not taking my baby from me."

"You should have told me about this before, Merilee."

"I was taking care of it. Or I thought I was." She detested clingy females. Was so stubborn about hiding her vulnerability that it was almost a sickness. "Besides, it was my own private shame."

"I wouldn't call it your own private shame any longer."

"Why, what would you . . . ?"

"I'd call it blackmail."

My high-powered New York City lawyer, Bruce Cooperman, was summering a half-hour away from us at his beach house in Willoughby, the ultra-exclusive shorefront village where he kept his yacht moored. Willoughby had a historic town green complete with gazebo and Revolutionary War memorial. A steepled white Congregational Church. Galleries selling all sorts of ugly, obscenely expensive art. Shops selling all sorts of ugly, obscenely expensive antiques. And it had The Nook, a dark, narrow, landmark diner with high-backed booths of well-worn wood.

I nosed my red 1958 Jaguar XK150 into one of the diagonal parking spaces out front, strolled in, snap-brim Panama fedora in hand, and paused in the doorway for my eyes to adjust to the dim lighting. I wore the new white linen suit I'd had made for me in Paris, a lavender shirt, polka-dot bow tie, and a pair of perforated spectator balmorals. Lulu was sporting her linen touring cap.

Bruce hollered to me from a booth in the back, turning snooty heads

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left and right. He was not much for couth. But you would not want to go up against him in court. The man was three parts pit bull and one part wild boar. And always rumpled. The Izod shirt and baggy shorts he had on looked as if he'd been sleeping in them all week.

He and I ordered BLTs. Lulu opted for a tuna melt, hold the toast, and kept her distance from Bruce. He sprayed a lot when he ate.

"As your attorney," he advised me between huge, open mouthfuls of his sandwich, "my feeling is Merilee has very little to worry about from this yutz. Should she have reported the accident at the time? Yes. Did she behave irresponsibly? Yes. But his uncorroborated testimony won't be enough to prompt any district attorney to file charges against her. Or buy him any kind of deal."

"Even if he claims she was driving?"

"Strictly his word against hers. And we're talking about a desperate sleazeball." Bruce took a gulp of his iced coffee. "Trouble is, we both know it's the media fallout that'll kill us. No way we want it out there that Merilee Nash was ever mixed up in this."

"How do we contain it, Bruce?"

"I've reached out to a fixer named Frank Tedone who happens to owe me one. Frank was a deputy superintendent in the Connecticut State Police until his darling wife got caught shoplifting several valuable items from Bendel's on Fifth Avenue. He was right there by her side the whole time and didn't even know what she was up to. Or so he claimed when store security landed on her. I managed to get the charges dropped, and he took early retirement and went private in Waterbury. But he's still got great contacts. His kid brother Rico's a lieutenant on the Major Crime Squad. That Sergeant Snipes who phoned you this morning? She works for Rico. Trust me, if Frank can't make this go away then no one can." Bruce glanced past me to the front door, waving his arm in the air. "And here he is, right on time."

Frank Tedone was a chesty fireplug in his late forties with a shaved head, a goatee, and a twenty-inch neck. The cheap, shiny black suit that he had on fit him just a bit too snug in the shoulders. He sat across from me next to Bruce and asked our waitress for a root beer milkshake, which immediately intrigued me. I'd never heard of any such thing.

"Okay, gents, here's what we know . . ." He opened a manila folder on the table. Inside were numerous computer printouts, incident statements, and clippings. He arrayed them before him very neatly, all corners squared. "As to the alleged hit-and-run in Stony Creek, the details Miss Nash provided pretty much correspond with the police reports from nineteen eighty-eight. A Yale architectural historian named Frank Lawson was indeed fatally struck late one night while out walking his dog. The family posted a reward for information. No one ever came forward. Case remains classified as an unsolved vehicular homicide." Tedone's root beer shake arrived in a tall fountain glass. He took a thirsty gulp, wiped some tan-col-

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ored foam from his moustache, and moved on to the next document. "As to why Mr. Romano has chosen now to surface in her life again, the answer could be that until four months ago he was serving a nickel at Enfield Correctional for breaking and entering. His third fall, not for nothing. The man's already gone down for receiving stolen property and for felony-weight coke possession. Has himself a wife and two kids in Providence, but I doubt he's spent more than six months under the same roof with them in the past ten years. Can't seem to stay out of trouble. He did manage to land that straight job at B and B Building Supply, but within days he was stealing stuff from the yard and peddling it at construction sites. Soon as they got wise to him, he took off with a full load of Marvin windows worth six figures and they never saw him or their truck again. Things have being going downhill fast for our Mr. Romano ever since. Major Crime has him dead to rights on these convenience-store robberies."

"Is he hooked up with a crew?" Bruce asked.

"Strictly a lone wolf," Tedone replied. "He used to be loosely affiliated with a mob family in Providence, but they kissed him goodbye years ago. Word is he owed bookies and loan sharks left and right, then snorted up the coke he was supposed to be selling to pay them back. He's lucky they didn't ice him. But I'm told they always cut him slack on account of they thought he was going to be a big movie star someday." Now he put the papers back in the folder and closed it. "If you want my sense of things, Hoagy, you should not get within five miles of this guy. Because when he gets busted, and he will, you need plausible deniability. You don't talk to him on the phone. You don't meet with him. And you for damned sure don't give him so much as one shiny quarter."

"He's already been to the house. Merilee gave him ten thousand dollars."

Tedone's face tightened. "Buddy, you may have a problem."

"So let's explore our options," Bruce charged in, stabbing the table with a blunt finger. "Scenario one, Hoagy sets up the payoff for tonight. We tip off the Major Crime Squad. They reel him in and—"

"He drags Merilee down with him." I shook my head. "Can't happen."

Tedone leaned over the table toward me, lowering his voice. "There are ways to make sure it doesn't."

"You can't keep his lawyer away from the TV cameras."

"It'll never get that far," he promised. "You set up the meet like Bruce just said, only I'm the one who shows up, not you. This bum's a miserable coward without a friend in the world. I'll make it abundantly clear to him that should he ever say word one about Merilee Nash to anyone—including his lawyer—he will not survive his first night in custody."

"What will happen to him?"

"He'll die while resisting arrest," Tedone said offhandedly, as if making such a thing happen was no more difficult than ordering a

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pizza with three toppings instead of two. Apparently, for him it wasn't. This was what made him a fixer. "There'll be a thorough investigation of the circumstances surrounding his unfortunate death, but the officers involved will be fully exonerated. At which time you'll be expected to make a suitable contribution to a fund for the survivors of men and women who've been killed on the job in this state."

That very same twenty-five thousand dollars, I guessed. Except this way I could write it off as a charitable donation. The tax-deductible hit. What would they think of next?

Across from me, Bruce's face was a blank. He wasn't saying yes. He wasn't saying no.

I looked down at Lulu under the table. Lulu was looking back up at me. "Let's be very clear about something," I said. "That's not how I want to handle this."

Tedone shrugged his bulging shoulders. "No disrespect, but you don't have a lot of wiggle room. If you want this guy out of your life, this is how it's done. Believe me, no one will be sorry to see him go. And there's absolutely no way it'll ever get back to you."

"What about that job application with my name on it?"

"It'll disappear."

Bruce cleared his throat. "Hoagy, if it's any help, Merilee never has to know about this."

"Yes, she does. I'd never conceal something like this from her. She once cared about the guy. Still does, for all I know. Thanks but no thanks. I'll handle it in my own way."

"You'll pay him the money, won't you?" Tedone shook his shaved head at me. "That's a fool's play. Also way too risky. The man's got nothing left to lose. He could shoot you dead right where you stand. Or bop you on the head and hold you for a million dollars' ransom."

Lulu let out a low moan at this.

Tedone frowned. "What's her problem?"

"She feels I'm worth at least two million."

He peered at me doubtfully, as if it had just dawned on him that I wasn't like other people. "I don't agree with your decision, but if you've made up your mind then I have to respect it. Only, I'm watching your back."

"No."

"Trust me, you'll never even know I'm there."

"No."

"Be sensible, Hoagy," Bruce pleaded. "You've got to take backup."

"Lulu's all the backup I've ever needed."

"Do you own a gun?" Tedone wanted to know.

"We keep a thirty-eight at the farm. I bought it last winter when there was an outbreak of rabid raccoons. You can't take chances when you have a small child."

"Pack it," he urged me. "Fully loaded."

"Not a chance."

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"Why the hell not?"

"Guns go off."

Tedone drained the last of his root beer milkshake, sighing with exasperation. "You've asked me for my advice. You want to ignore it, fine. But just so you know, your whole world is about to blow up in your face."

"It won't be the first time."

Not all of Willoughby belonged on a picture postcard. On the eastern bank of the Four Mile River, across an old cast-iron bridge, lay the crumbling red-brick ruins of a mill that had once been the world's largest maker of solid brass casket handles. The riverfront there was a fetid waste dump of sludgy black water, broken glass, and garbage. Rats ran wild. Some brave young artists were hoping to renovate sections of the old mill for studio space. But for now it was where local kids went to get their buzz on. Dealers were frequently busted there for peddling weed, crystal meth, even heroin.

P.J. Romano told me to meet him at ten P.M. by what once was the front gate. After I crossed the river there were no streetlights and no one around. All was darkness and ominous quiet. I left the Jaguar at the foot of the bridge and hoofed it the rest of the way, flashlight in hand, fat ten-by-thirteen-inch mailing pouch tucked under one arm. Lulu marched stoutly along by my side with her large black nose to the ground, snuffling.

As far as Merilee knew, I'd driven down to the beach to walk my new book around, which was something I often did. I'd told her not to worry—Bruce was handling everything. She'd seemed grateful. She'd even agreed to let my mother babysit Tracy until the situation sorted itself out.

As I neared the ravaged brick pillars that once supported the mill's front gate, Lulu let out a low warning growl. He was already there waiting for us.

In the beam from my flashlight P. J. Romano looked like a creature that was meant to live in the dark—all jawbones, snaggly, rotting brown teeth, and wild, bulging eyes. He was very gaunt, very pale. A sheen of oily sweat clung to his forehead. He wore a tank top, cutoffs, and sneakers without socks. The butt of a handgun stuck out of the waistband of his cutoffs.

"That's funny," he said in his raspy voice. "You're taller than I thought you'd be."

"That's funny, you're not."

Next to me, Lulu settled into a low, watchful crouch.

"But you done good, bro." He shined his own light on the pouch under my arm. "Didn't call the cops."

"How do you know I didn't?"

"Because you smart guys know how to roll, that's how. You take what you want, then you protect what's yours. That's how things

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work, right?" He had dry mouth. Kept licking his lips. "It should be me up there."

"Up where?"

"On the big screen. I got more acting talent in this little finger than Tom Cruise has in his whole body."

"Quite a few of us can say that, as it happens."

"I just wouldn't kiss up to them, is all. They don't like that."

"'They?'"

"Directors. Not a one of them ever gave me a fair shot. Wouldn't even listen to what I was saying. Just kept telling me what to do, where to go . . ."

"Yeah, that's why they call them directors."

"The smug bastards," he grumbled bitterly. "Treated all of the others like their precious little princes and princesses. Pampered them. Stroked them. Forgave them no matter how many times they fell on their face . . ." P.J. fished a pack of Kools from his hip pocket and lit one, his hands shaking. "But not me. Never me. Me they buried. I had the chops. I had the looks. I had it all. So how come they didn't give *me* a chance, hunh?"

I didn't answer him. He wasn't expecting me to. Wasn't talking to me.

Lulu got up now and circled around behind him, a low growl coming from her throat. She has a pretty menacing growl for someone with no legs.

P.J. looked at her, amused. "What's *he* going to do—lick me to death?"

"He is a she. And be careful what you wish for."

He flicked his cigarette off into the darkness. It hit the pavement with a shower of sparks. "Give it here," he said, meaning the money.

I handed him the mailing pouch. He ripped it open greedily, shining his light inside. "What the hell's this?"

"The current Lyme-Old Lyme phone directory. And they're damned hard to come by, so I want it back."

"Where's my money?" he demanded furiously.

"There's no money, P.J."

"I *told* you to bring it."

"I know what you told me, but I don't take direction well. I suppose we're a lot alike in that respect."

P.J. gaped at me in disbelief. "Bro, what in the hell are you . . . ?"

"Giving you one last chance to walk away. If you ever come near my wife or daughter again, I'll kill you. I'll get away with it, too. The police will even thank me. If you're too wacked out or just plain stupid to realize that I'm trying to do you a favor, then so be it. But I needed to give you this chance. I don't want you on my conscience. It's already plenty crowded."

"You came here to play with me? What are you, tripping? I *need* that money!"

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"And I need to floss daily. That doesn't mean it's going to happen."

Behind him, Lulu moved in closer, teeth bared, her growl now a full-fledged snarl.

"Okay, tell her to cut that out," P.J. warned me, his eyes widening.

"I can try, but she's very independent-minded. All of the women in my life are."

"I ain't kidding around. She comes any closer, I'll blow her head off!"

Actually, he kicked her. Or tried to. Not a wise move. All he got for his trouble was Lulu's jaws clamped hard around his bare ankle.

Cursing in angry pain, P.J. reached into his waistband for his Glock semiautomatic. That was when his nose collided with my right fist. He went right down, blood gushing from his nose. The Glock clattered away on the pavement. He lunged for it. He never made it.

That was when two shots rang out from the darkness.

P.J. took the first one in the chest, the second in his throat. Let out a soft groan and then crumpled to his knees. He was gone by the time he toppled over on his side to the ground.

I whirled and my flashlight found Merilee standing there behind me with our .38 clutched in her hand and a calm expression on her face. Lulu ran to her and tried to climb up her leg, whooping and moaning, tail thumping. Me, I went and took the gun from her. Then I heard footsteps on the pavement. Someone else running toward us. It seemed Merilee wasn't the only one who'd decided to tail me that evening.

Frank Tedone knelt beside what had once been P.J. Romano, then looked up at us inquiringly.

"Merilee Nash, say hello to Frank Tedone."

"Very pleased to meet you, Mr. Tedone," she said graciously.

"Right back at you. The wife's a big fan. Which one of you shot him?"

"I did," I said quickly.

"He did not," Merilee insisted. "It was all my doing."

"Well, you'd both better go right home and stay there. I'll take over from here." Tedone pocketed P.J.'s Glock, then took the .38 from me and gripped it in each hand before he stuck it in P.J.'s dead hand and fired it once into the air. "You hired me to make the payoff and it went bad," he explained. "He pulled his .38. The two of us grappled for it and it went off."

"But that gun's registered to me," I reminded him.

"He stole it from your house."

"We didn't report it stolen."

Tedone waved me off. "Don't worry about that. This is what you're paying me for. That the drop money?" he asked, pointing to the mailer pouch.

"In a manner of speaking."

"Give it to me. And beat it. You two were never here, understood?"

We understood. We started back toward the old stone bridge with Lulu trotting along ahead of us, her tail swishing. Merilee had left

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our old tan Land Rover next to the Jaguar. Tedone's Chevy Tahoe was parked alongside. When I looked back at him, Tedone was crouched over P.J.'s body with his flashlight, going through his pockets. Merilee didn't look back. She never looked back.

"Merilee, are you okay?"

"Never better, darling. Although I do wish you'd stop asking me that."

It was two hours later and I was still waiting for an emotional response from her. Relief. Horror. Tears. So far, she'd just gone about her business as if it were any other night. Thanked my mother for babysitting Tracy. Got Tracy settled in her crib. Put away a midnight supper of Caesar salad and four-alarm chili washed down with two frosty mugs of hefeweizen, all topped off by a leisurely soak in the claw-footed tub. Now we were snuggled in bed together in the moonlight with a fresh breeze coming off of Whalebone Cove and Lulu snoring contentedly in her easy chair by the door.

"In fact," she added, "I fully intend to get the first good night's sleep I've had in a month."

"I have one more thing I need to ask you."

"Very well. What is it?"

"Why did you do it?"

"As an act of mercy. You didn't know the young P.J. The wild and gifted and beautiful P.J. The man who couldn't miss. This P.J. was just so miserable and sick that he'd become a danger to everyone, including himself. I did the humane thing by putting him down. Besides, he was my mess."

"You really loved that guy, didn't you?"

"With all of my heart and soul," she acknowledged. "When he and I split up I didn't think I'd make it. It took months and months for the wounds to heal. And years before I believed it was even possible to love a man again."

"What changed your mind?"

"You did, silly."

"Good answer. Do we have any vanilla ice cream in the freezer?"

"If we don't, I can get some tomorrow at Walt's Market."

"Could you pick me up some bottles of Stewart's Old-Fashioned root beer, too?"

"Certainly," she said, yawning hugely. "Nothing's too good for my man."

She dropped off at once with her head on my chest, her sleep the untroubled, innocent sleep of Tracy. As I lay there holding her, it occurred to me that despite all of our ups and downs—the years of loving each other, hating each other, loving each other all over again—I still didn't know Merilee Nash. None of us really knows the person we love. That's nothing but a sweet illusion. Then I closed my own eyes and, smiling, fell asleep with this stranger in my arms. ●

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Gypsy Gold

by Edward D. Hoch

Edward D. Hoch's Gypsy king, Michael Vlado, always seems to be in the thick of important current events. The following case is no exception. A new proposal to open-pit mine gold in the Transylvanian hills has Michael called out to talk to the proponent of the project—where he finds himself mixed up in an unexpected murder. ¶

Michael Vlado had been home in his village of Gravita for more than a year, raising horses and tending to his farm in the Transylvanian foothills. He liked to tell his wife Rosanna that his foreign adventures were behind him, that he would concentrate on the farm now and his position as a Gypsy king. "I have never been a wanderer," he told her one spring evening as they sat by the fire and she worked at carving the intricate little animals she sold at the village shops. The conveniences of modern life had come slowly to the foothills of the Carpathians, but they now had a telephone and even a small television set, which they rarely watched.

"And yet you have wandered far, to Paris with your racehorse just last year," she reminded him.

"I hope those days are past. There is much to do right here. That gold-mine venture is disturbing for all of us who live in these hills."

The discovery of gold in Transylvania dated from the second century, when the Emperor Trajan extended Roman territory to include the western half of present-day Romania and began mining Europe's most important gold deposits. The mining had continued to the present day, with the Communists using an open-pit method to extract as much gold as possible. The mine had shut down early in 2006, but within a year there was talk of reopening and expanding it, taking several of the Gypsy farms that dotted the hillside.

Michael's longtime friend Captain Segar, who'd moved from the government militia to a higher federal security position with the fall of Romania's Socialist rulers, had warned Michael about the coming of the gold miners.

Sam Segar appeared at the farm with new and disturbing news.

"I wanted you to be the first to hear," he told Michael. "The government is scheduled to approve the MagiGold Corporation's bid to

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begin open-pit mining along this entire stretch of farmland."

Michael was concerned but not alarmed. "Do you think it will ever really happen? Perhaps it will go the way of the Dracula theme park they started to build on the other side of the mountain. That idea collapsed when Prince Charles of Britain and other activists showed their outrage."

"But these men are serious, Michael. Digging wealth from the ground is much easier than attracting customers to an amusement park in the middle of nowhere."

Michael Vlado gazed across the field at the distant mountains. "I thought the environmental organizations were opposed to open-pit mining. The ground is still ruptured from the last mine."

Segar nodded. "This mine would use large quantities of highly toxic cyanide, too, making it even more harmful. Some Gypsy farms not part of the actual dig would probably still suffer." He filled Michael in on past problems with cyanide leaching.

"Who can I see about this?"

"You might come along with me today. I'm on my way to visit Hans Creange. He's the last of the holdouts, with fifty acres of land dead center on the proposed site, and he may be ready to back down."

"I know Creange," Michael said, "but he is not a Rom. I doubt if my opinions would mean anything to him."

"If he sells, the Gypsy farms might well be affected, even this farm."

"Why are you opposed to it, Segar?" Michael wondered. "You are a government official."

"The government was opposed to it too, until quite recently. The people at MagiGold Corporation have convinced them that the gold-mining venture would pump more than two billion dollars into the Romanian economy."

Michael thought about it. "You're going there now?"

Segar nodded. "A MagiGold representative is meeting with Creange at noon."

"Then I should be there too," Michael decided. "Many of these small farms are owned by my people."

He told Rosanna he'd be gone for several hours and she came out to greet Segar. "Just get him home for supper," she requested as Michael slipped into his favorite maroon tunic.

"Don't worry. I hope to be back in Bucharest by that time."

It took them almost an hour over the bumpy mountain roads to reach the Creange farm. A black sedan of Russian make was parked in the driveway, a sign that the representative of MagiGold had arrived before them. Segar led the way up the cobblestone walk to the front door of the ancient farmhouse and knocked loudly. Presently Hans Creange opened the door to admit them. He was a tall, slender man with a goatee, who seemed surprised to see Michael.

"You're Vlado, the Gypsy," he said by way of greeting. "I wasn't

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expecting you."

"I asked him to come," Segar explained. "His Gypsy tribe has a number of farms in the area that could be impacted by this mining operation."

"Then you'll want to speak with Serge Brunner from the MagiGold Corporation. I am only concerned with my farm."

He led them into the dining room, where Brunner was seated at the table. In typical Romanian fashion, Creange had offered his visitor food and drink as soon as he arrived. Brunner had chosen a cup of his host's specially blended jasmine tea, without milk. He liked it so much he took a whiff of the tea leaves, scented with fragrant jasmine blossoms. Segar, who'd met the MagiGold representative before, introduced Michael as a Gypsy king. Brunner, a slender, well-dressed man wearing a dark suit and necktie, was probably in his forties. He shook hands and said, "I never would take you for a Rom, Mr. Vlado. You have no gold teeth. Don't all Romanian Gypsies have gold teeth?"

"Many have gold caps on their teeth, and wear gold rings on every finger," Michael replied. "I do not."

"But the Romanian Gypsy likes gold."

"I suppose all Gypsies do, to some extent. That does not mean they are ready to sacrifice their farms to a gold mine."

"Here, sit down and join us in some tea," Creange said, producing two more cups. "It is my special blend of jasmine."

"It's quite flavorful," Brunner assured them. "I've never had jasmine before. Here, smell the leaves."

Tea was a popular drink in the country, and Michael had to admit this blend was especially flavorful. "Will you be selling your farm to MagiGold?" Segar asked.

"We are discussing that," Brunner said before Creange could answer. "This is a key location in MagiGold's overall planning."

Suddenly, from outside, came the sound of a cascade of stones hitting the house. Michael was on his feet at once, running to the window. A handful of Rom youths stood in the road, pelting the house and the black sedan with stones and a few good-sized rocks. Already Hans Creange was pulling a shotgun from his closet, but Michael waved him away. "I'll handle this," he said.

He stepped outside, calling some of the youths by name. "Put down those stones at once or I'll have you before the Rom court!"

One of the older youths was the first to drop his stones. "We didn't know you were here," he pleaded.

"You are Nikolo, are you not?"

"Yes, sir," he admitted.

The others had joined Michael in front of the house, and Serge Brunner ran over to inspect his car. "There are dents from the stones," he reported. "And my windshield is badly cracked." He lunged at the youth but Nikolo easily pushed him away.

"We don't want you here!" the Gypsy lad shouted. "You take our

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land for a gold mine. You ruin the farms, you drive us away. But not this time! The Roms will stop you! If you come back I will break another of your windshields."

Michael walked across the yard and grabbed the youth by his shirt. He was slender and nearly as tall as Michael, perhaps eighteen years old, with a pronounced Adam's apple. He lived with his family on a farm close to Michael's and worked with the horses on some of the other farms. "Go home!" he told Nikolo. "I'll deal with MagiGold."

"Make sure that you do," one of the others yelled, but Michael ignored him.

He returned to the house as the youths broke into smaller groups and scattered. "I'm sorry about the damage to your car," he told Serge Brunner. "It's not too serious, except for the badly cracked windshield. I know a garage that will install a new one while you wait, and there'll be no charge. It's only a ten-minute drive from here."

"A Gypsy garage?" the businessman asked, a bit uncertainly, as he finished his tea and prepared to leave.

"Don't worry, I'll drive down there with you. There'll be no trouble. It'll give us a chance to talk."

Segar asked, "Where are you taking him, to Osman's place?"

"That's the only Rom garage we have, and I know he has several sizes of Russian windshields in stock. It should be no problem."

"I'll stay here and talk with Creange. Then I'll drive down to the garage and pick you up."

"Fine."

Brunner told Creange he would return to continue their conversation. "Perhaps next week," he said, glancing up at the trees just beginning to leaf out. "This spring weather is not good for my allergies."

The spider-web cracks in Brunner's windshield made driving difficult, but on the back roads, without traffic, it didn't seriously impede them. Michael sat next to him in the front seat and wasted no time in getting to the point. "My people are very concerned about your plans to reopen and greatly expand the old gold mine. It would swallow up several of our farms and ruin the natural beauty of these foothills."

Brunner shook his head, dismissing the argument. "Don't you see, it would bring more than two billion dollars into your country's economy! It would help everyone, including the Gypsy people."

"What about your plan to use cyanide leaching to recover gold from old tailings in the mine?"

Brunner smiled. "I can see you are well versed in our mining techniques, but I assure you it is perfectly safe. It will be a self-contained project posing no risk to the environment. Any cyanide-laced water will be carefully dammed up."

"In nineteen ninety-nine another mining company used a leaching operation to recover gold from an old mine north of here. They dammed the water too, but the dam burst and the contaminated water flowed all the way down to the Danube, killing twelve hun-

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dred tons of fish in Hungary alone."

"We learned a good lesson from their tragic error. It won't happen to us."

Osman's Garage was at the bottom of the hill, a post-war building that had appeared with the coming of peace, and the Russians, in the mid 1940s. The Russians departed, but a Socialist government remained, with the former king of Romania in exile. The little garage in the foothills was too small for government ownership, and after the death of the original owner a Gypsy named Osman was allowed to buy it. Segar had explained some years ago, when the old Socialist government collapsed, that so long as the Roms used Romanian names in the conduct of their business the government would not bother them. Some, living openly in Gypsy camps, had been moved elsewhere by the government.

Osman was a wiry little Gypsy who'd chosen to live and work apart from the Rom community. He knew Michael, but had never acknowledged him as a Gypsy king. Now he simply glanced at the cracked windshield and said, "I have several Russian windshields in stock. It should be no problem."

Michael nodded and introduced the car's owner. "This is Serge Brunner, from the MagiGold Corporation. He's here about the mine."

Osman grunted. "Many people do not want it. Change is not a good thing."

"This wouldn't really be change, except in the size. There has always been a gold mine here. As the area prospered, it would bring more business to you."

A stout woman in a beaded dress appeared from the back of the garage. She had the braided hair and dark complexion of some Gypsy women, with coins hanging from the ends of her braids. "What is it, Osman?" she asked.

"Nothing. A customer." He added, feeling some introduction was necessary, "My wife Una."

She nodded to them, ignoring Brunner and concentrating on Michael. "You are a Rom?" she asked.

"I am Michael Vlado. I raise horses on my farm up the hill."

"The one called the Gypsy king?"

He tried to make light of it. "I am king only to a small tribe."

"Can't you do something to stop this madness?" She glared at Serge Brunner as she spoke.

Michael turned to the MagiGold representative. "You see? You're not very popular here."

"I will be popular when the money starts pouring in."

Osman had been looking through his supply of windshields. "You're in luck," he announced. "I have a perfect fit for you." He set to work removing the damaged one.

"How long will it take?" Brunner asked. "I have other calls to make."

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Osman shrugged. "Thirty or forty minutes if all goes well. You may wait in my office."

Michael and Brunner were shown into a tiny, windowless room with an ancient wooden desk and two chairs. A scenic calendar on the wall had not been changed since March, and there was an air of neglect about the place. Still, Michael knew that Osman made an adequate living servicing cars and trucks from the Gypsy farms. Michael closed the door behind him, planning to continue their conversation, but Brunner sat down, shaking his head and waving him away.

"What's the matter?" Michael asked.

Brunner's eyes rolled up and he slid off the chair, clutching his side.

"What is it?" He knelt by the man, trying to help him. But Brunner was motionless, his eyes closed.

Michael opened the door and called to Osman, who was removing the last slivers of glass from the broken windshield. "What happened to him?" he asked, coming over to the office and kneeling by the prone man.

"I don't know. He just collapsed."

A car pulled up outside and Michael saw that Segar had arrived. "He's dead," Osman said.

"What? That couldn't be!"

Segar entered the garage and saw the consternation on Michael's face. "What is it?"

"Brunner is dead. He just dropped over a couple of minutes ago."

Segar motioned them away and knelt by the body, testing for breathing with a small pocket mirror. "He's dead," he confirmed. "Tell me everything that happened."

Michael described it as best he could, with Osman and his wife filling in the gaps. It was then that Segar bent down to examine the body again. "I remember my early days in the militia all too well," he said, pushing aside the dead man's suit coat. Una gasped as a bloody tear in the shirt was revealed.

"What is it?" Michael asked, though he knew all too well.

Segar opened the shirt. "A knife wound from a very thin blade. It didn't bleed much, but it appears to have gone straight to his heart."

Shaking his head, Michael couldn't believe what he saw. "That's impossible, I was alone with him all the time."

Segar studied his face. "Do you have a knife on you, Michael?" he asked quietly.

"I always carry one on my belt. You know that."

"Could I see it?"

Michael slid the hunting knife from its scabbard and held it out. He winced as Segar wrapped it in a handkerchief. "You can see there's no blood on it."

"None visible, but it'll have to be examined."

"Segar—"

"I'm sorry, Michael."

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"You can't believe I did this."

"What other explanation is there?"

"He tussled a bit with that lad Nikolo. He might have been stabbed then."

"Michael, that was a half-hour ago. No one could take a wound that close to the heart without knowing about it."

"What are you going to do, arrest me?"

"Of course not. I don't arrest people anymore. But I must report this to the proper authorities."

While they waited for the county's Criminal Investigation Directorate to arrive, Michael spoke to Osman and Una. Neither of them had seen anything unusual about Serge Brunner. "He was one of those wealthy businessmen who come here to steal from the Roms," Una complained. "What killed him?"

"He was stabbed," Segar told her.

"He deserved it. If you killed him, Michael Vlado, I honor you."

"I didn't kill anyone. And if you think killing one man could stop this mining enterprise, you're mistaken."

Soon the familiar white van with *Politia* painted on its sides pulled up in front of the garage. Two blue-uniformed officers emerged. Segar knew the older of the two, Senior Agent Balen, a graying man with a stomach that strained at the buttons of his shirt. He told the man what had happened, while his junior officer photographed the crime scene with a digital camera. Michael gave the officer a statement and was grateful when Segar promised to see that he appeared at the local inspectorate office in the morning for further questioning.

"I think I should take you home now," he told Michael after the body had been removed. The officers continued their search of the small office, but no weapon was uncovered. They searched the entire garage without finding a knife. Michael's knife went with them for testing.

"All right," Michael finally agreed. "Rosanna will be expecting me."

He told his wife everything that had transpired, lingering over a glass of dinner wine in hopes it would revive his spirits. Rosanna tried her best to help. "No one thinks you killed that man, Michael," she insisted.

"Why not? He was going to ruin the lives of at least a half-dozen Rom families. Our people are not like other farmers. They cannot pick up and move to another village or a different country. In Romania, the Rom are relatively safe."

"So long as they don't call themselves what they really are."

"The point is, they cannot safely move from these foothills without risking persecution, possibly death." He stared down at his hands, wondering if somehow he might have plunged his knife into Brunner's chest without realizing it. No, he decided, that was not possible, unless he was completely crazy. "I'm going out," he decided finally. "I want to speak with that youth Nikolo."

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"Don't do anything foolish," Rosanna cautioned.

It was not quite dark as Michael rode one of his horses across the fields to the Fatuloiu farm. Nikolo was their eldest son, full of Rom pride and a fighting spirit. Michael had often wished that Nikolo could have attended school like other boys his age, but he was thankful at least that the parents had taught him to read and write. Too many Gypsies were illiterate, doomed to a life of begging and theft.

He dismounted and was walking toward the farmhouse when he spotted Nikolo coming from the barn with an armload of firewood. He called to him, but the youth dropped the wood and started running. Michael cursed under his breath and took off after him. He caught up with him within fifty yards and once more grabbed him by the shirt.

"I don't mean to harm you," he told the youth. "I just want to talk."

For all his earlier bluster, it was obvious that word of Brunner's death had already reached the boy and frightened him. "I didn't kill him!" he insisted, almost tearfully. "I was nowhere near Osman's Garage."

"I know that. I just need to know if there's any way you might have wounded him while you were scuffling up at Creange's place. Do you have a knife?"

"No! They won't let me carry one."

Michael didn't believe that for an instant. He knew many young Roms, and by the time they were Nikolo's age every one carried a knife. Even the girls had them, usually in their stocking tops or strapped to their thighs. "We'll see about that," he said, holding fast to the lad's shirt while he patted him down. He found the knife in a small scabbard near the left ankle.

The size of it made him laugh. "What were you planning to kill with this toothpick? A mosquito?"

"I needed a small one so my father wouldn't find it," he confessed. "Don't tell him."

"Did you jab Brunner with it?"

"I couldn't even reach it down there. I've never stabbed anyone with it."

"Where'd you get it?"

"My—my sister gave it to me when I turned sixteen. She said a Rom had to carry a knife, even though our parents didn't allow it." Michael could see that the admission embarrassed him. He was a different person from the young braggart who'd thrown stones and threatened Brunner earlier that day.

"Could any of your friends have stabbed him?"

"No one came near him but me."

Michael weighed the little knife in his hand. "All right," he said, handing it back. "I'd advise you to keep this in your room. It would be useless in a knife fight, and you might be safer without it."

In the morning Michael drove down to the county inspectorate's office

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as requested. He was pleased to see Segar there, along with Senior Agent Balen and another man he didn't know. It quickly became obvious that this man was an executive of MagiGold Corporation, one Heinrich Trantori. He wore thick eyeglasses and a small goatee, perhaps to compensate for the thinning hair on his head.

As they settled down for their meeting, Segar immediately returned Michael's knife to him. "There was no trace of blood on the blade or hasp, and the murder weapon had a thinner blade than yours."

"A small blade?"

"Narrow, but long enough to reach the heart."

He thought about the small knife he'd returned to Nikolo. It was narrow, but he doubted it was long enough. Agent Balen opened the questioning, asked Michael to recount the events of the prior day again in detail. As he finished, Trantori entered the conversation. "You admit that as a Gypsy king you are opposed to MagiGold's plans for the mine."

"Certainly I do not wish to see my people displaced."

"All the people of Romania will benefit from this, including your Gypsies who will be paid good money for their property."

"What about the farms that are taken over? Gypsies cannot simply pack up and move elsewhere."

The businessman smiled. "They can if they stop being Gypsies. Many already have."

"It's difficult for those who are illiterate, whose entire life has been centered around these few acres of land."

As he finished, Balen cut in. "We're not here to argue the merits of the gold mine but to determine who killed Serge Brunner. You claim, Michael Vlado, that he collapsed while alone in the room with you. Later examination uncovered a stab wound. Until there is some other explanation you must remain our prime suspect."

"His knife didn't match the wound," Segar reminded him. "The tiny office had no windows and no other knife was found anywhere in the garage. The only possible explanation is that he was wounded earlier, at Creange's house, and didn't realize the extent of his injury."

Michael shook his head. "I spoke with Nikolo Fatuloiu last evening. He was the only Rom youth who had direct contact with Brunner, but he had no weapon that could have inflicted the wound."

"Where does that leave us?" Balen wanted to know.

"Back to Hans Creange," Michael decided.

He suggested that Segar accompany him to Creange's place, but his friend professed to have other business. Michael's route took him back past Osman's garage, and when he saw Una Osman washing a car out front he decided to stop.

"They did not arrest you?" she asked, surprised to see him.

"They had no evidence. My knife couldn't have killed him."

"Then who?"

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"I was hoping you or your husband might answer that."

Osman himself appeared then, smoking his pipe and lugging a fender for a black Porsche. "Have they completed their investigation?" he asked, setting down his burden.

"Not yet. They're working on a number of factors. I was wondering about something. When the place was searched, neither you nor Una was carrying a knife. That is most unusual for Roms."

Osman shook his head. "Not for us. Una and I live as Romanians, not as Gypsies. Neither of us has ever carried a knife and you will find none here. The tools of my trade include nothing that could have made the wound."

"And he wasn't even in the room with you when it happened," Una was quick to point out.

"I know that." Michael felt suddenly helpless. Whatever he'd expected to find, it wasn't here. "But you and your husband both expressed opposition to reopening and greatly expanding the old mine."

"Of course!" Osman said. "An open-pit mine of that size would be a terrible blight on the landscape. It would drive people from the area even if their farms were not directly affected."

It was true. Michael knew it was true. And someone had tried to stop it by killing MagiGold's representative.

Hans Creange was working in his yard when Michael pulled up and parked. He put down his hoe and wiped some drops of sweat from his forehead. "Just in time for me to take a break. Spring planting is always a chore."

"You do it all yourself?"

"Just this front part. I hire Gypsies for the field work."

"You didn't want to lose that, did you? Serge Brunner represented the end of the life you've been living."

"Captain Segar, or whatever his job is now, said the same thing. He said I shouldn't sell."

"Did you kill Serge Brunner?" Michael asked suddenly.

"Kill him? He was alive and well when he left here. I'd have more reason to ask you the same question."

"With a blade thin and sharp enough, he might not have realized he'd been stabbed."

"They said on the news that the wound was to the heart. How could he have driven you to the garage with such a wound?"

"I don't know," Michael admitted.

"Well, whatever happened, I am pleased that he's dead."

"They'll only send another."

"And perhaps someone will kill him too."

Michael drove back to his farm. He was unusually quiet during dinner and Rosanna could sense something was wrong. "What is it?" she asked finally.

"I've talked to everyone involved with Serge Brunner and I still

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don't know who killed him. The police suspect me, I know that. Maybe even Segar still suspects me."

"Talk to me about it," she urged.

He poured them a little wine and started in, thankful for her concern. "There are only six of us who had any contact with Brunner yesterday. For a few moments I feared I might have stabbed him and blocked it from my memory, but my knife couldn't have made that wound. Segar wasn't near enough to him that I remember, and if Brunner was stabbed at Creange's house he couldn't have lived more than a few minutes. That would seem to eliminate both Creange and the youth Nikolo. The murder must have occurred at Osman's Garage, but I was alone with him when it happened. Osman's wife Una was in the back somewhere and Osman himself didn't enter the room until after Brunner collapsed and I called to him. Even then, he had no knife and I was right there with him all the time."

Rosanna, who had a flare for fantasy at times, suggested, "Una might have climbed up into the ceiling panel, gotten above the room where you were, pushed aside one of the panels, and stabbed Brunner with some sort of spear."

At least the idea brought a smile to Michael's face. "You've never been to Osman's Garage, have you? There are no ceiling panels. The walls and ceiling are plaster, the floor is stone. No windows in the room where he died, no place large enough for someone to have hidden."

"Perhaps an idea will come to you overnight," she said.

Already the press and television news had placed the blame directly on the Gypsies. He retired that night after seeing the president of MagiGold Corporation denounce the killing of his employee as the barbarous act of Gypsy thugs. His dreams were swirling, misty things as he imagined the Roms stripping him of his leadership position because of the unexplained crime.

He awakened relieved that it had been only a dream, but the mystery was no closer to a solution.

It was afternoon when Segar's familiar black government car appeared on the road. Michael left the horses and walked out to meet his friend, wondering if the police had decided to arrest him after all.

"Is there anything new?" he asked, kicking a small limb off to the side of the road.

Segar was smiling, looking very pleased with himself. "Michael, you really must get a personal computer up here."

"What would that do for me?"

"You could search the Internet, as I did last evening."

"I'm afraid computers would be lost on most Roms. How do they read a computer when they cannot read a newspaper or a book?"

"But you can read, and you could have looked something up as I did."

"What? Gold mines?"

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"No, allergies."

Michael thought about it. "Brunner mentioned his allergies were bothering him, but what does—?"

"Tea is often considered to be good for allergies, but on the Internet I found some rare cases of an allergy to jasmine tea, especially to the tea dust. Remember how Brunner smelled the leaves? And he said he'd never had it before."

"You're telling me the tea killed him?"

Segar shook his head. "But there's a strong possibility an allergic reaction might have caused him to lose consciousness for a few minutes."

"That still doesn't explain how he was killed."

"Think about it, Michael. What did you do after his collapse?"

"I called to Osman for help. He came in, knelt by the body, and said he was dead. I never took my eyes off him."

Segar disagreed. "I was arriving at that very minute and you said you saw me, so you had to look away for an instant. That was when Osman stabbed him."

"He had no knife!" Michael protested. "I would surely have seen a knife."

"But what was he doing when you opened the door and called to him? You told me he was removing the last slivers of glass from the broken windshield. He came in and knelt by the body with a sliver of glass—a dagger of glass—in his hand. Brunner may have moved or blinked his eyes, something to show he was still alive, and Osman plunged the glass dagger into his heart. He pulled the man's jacket over the wound and carried the weapon away with him."

"I never saw it," Michael admitted.

"Because it was glass."

"But wouldn't it have broken going into his chest?"

"Not unless it hit a rib. Remember this wasn't ordinary window glass but strong laminated glass from a car's windshield."

"We'd better go talk to him."

Segar placed a friendly hand on Michael's shoulder. "I had Agent Balen arrest him an hour ago. He says he never meant to kill Brunner, but when he knelt by the man with that sliver of glass in his hand, he wanted to do something for the Gypsy heritage he'd ignored all these years. You looked away for an instant and he killed him."

Michael was silent for a moment. Then he said, "In a way we all killed him. Creange gave him tea that apparently brought on his allergy, Nikolo cracked his windshield with a rock, I didn't realize he was still alive, and Osman stabbed him with a piece of glass. It was a chain of regrettable events."

"Don't blame yourself," Segar said. "I just wanted to tell you what happened. I'll be heading back now."

"You must stay for supper," Michael insisted. "You solved the mystery when I failed. That deserves a reward."●

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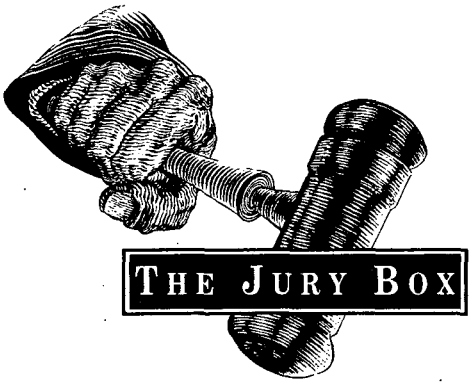

THE JURY BOX

by Jon L. Breen

Mystery fiction has long been associated with games and puzzles, usually figuratively but sometimes literally. The battle between sleuth and perp is often likened to a chess game, and Chandler's Philip Marlowe did chess problems for a hobby. Stories by writers as renowned as Henry Slesar and John Lutz have accompanied jigsaw puzzles, while dozens of novels have combined crosswords with detection, including contemporary series by Parnell Hall and Nero Blanc. The first two books reviewed below, among the best of the year, don't include chess puzzles per se, but the game is important in both. The first of a new children's series introduces a puzzle-loving juvenile sleuth, while two books explore the whodunit possibilities of sudoku.

***** Michael Chabon: *The Yiddish Policemen's Union,* HarperCollins, $26.95. One of the most acclaimed living American novelists here celebrates two popular genres at once: mystery fiction in its police procedural subcategory and science fiction in its alternate history branch. In Chabon's world, the state of Israel fell in the late 1940s and Sitka, Alaska, is a Jewish refuge. As its reversion to the U.S.A. approaches, Detective Meyer Landsman, whose new boss is his ex-wife, tries to solve the murder of a hotel guest who registered under the name of a past chess master and left behind an unfinished game that may be a clue. An ambitious work that exudes imagination and love of language also proves a genuine and well-constructed whodunit.

**** Martin Cruz Smith: *Stalin's Ghost,* Simon & Schuster, $26.95. A televised "blitz" chess tournament is one of several memorable scenes in the sixth novel about Moscow cop Arkady Renko, who debuted in the 1981 landmark *Gorky Park*. The investigation into some subway sightings of the ghost of Joseph Stalin centers on an ominous turn in Russian politics. The prose, the characters, the unpredictable plot, and especially the picture of post-Soviet life are all outstanding. (continued p.120)

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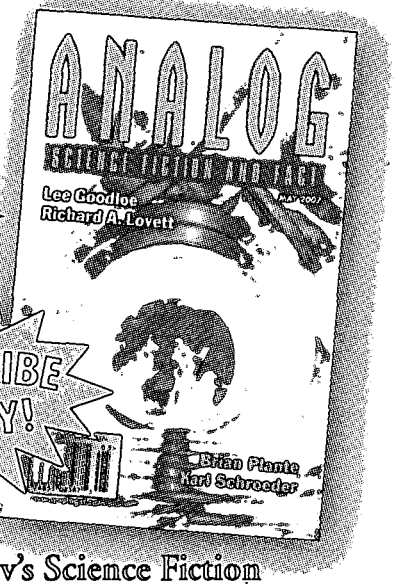

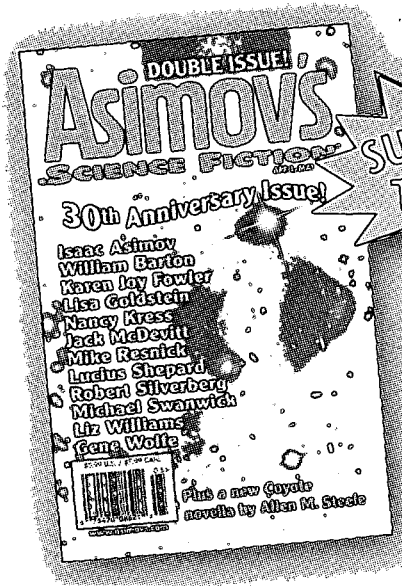

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Party's Over

by Patricia Smiley

Homicide detective Tom Bonner sat hunched over his desk in the squad room of the Ladera Bonita Police Department, inhaling the aroma of Chinese takeout left over from lunch. Watch had changed and most of the patrol officers were now out in the field. The nine-to-fivers were packing up to leave the station as well. In less than an hour he'd be leaving, too. For the last time. The thought squeezed his chest like a vise because Bonner loved his job almost as much as he hated it.

Patricia Smiley makes her *EQMM* debut this month, but she is not new to the genre. She's the author of two mystery novels that have made the *Los Angeles Times* bestseller list, *False Profits* and *Cover Your Assets*, and a third released just months ago, *Short Change*. All of the titles feature her financial planner amateur sleuth Tucker Sinclair. Ms. Smiley lives in California, where her books are set.

He shifted his gaze to the desktop where the flier announcing his retirement party lay. He studied the caricature in the middle of the page, reluctantly acknowledging the resemblance. The so-called artist had used his least attractive features to make him look ridiculous. He stared at the cartoon walrus moustache and horse teeth and wondered how he was going to make it through the night.

He hadn't wanted a party, didn't feel much like celebrating, but his partner had organized the event. He was obligated to go. At times like these he regretted being single. Still, being alone would make it easier to slip away early without being noticed.

Bonner had worked with many partners in his career. Matthew Quinn would be his last one. They had all moved on for one reason or another—retired, promoted, transferred to other divisions, or they had abandoned Homicide because all that death had started to mess with their heads. Quinn was young but one of the best detectives Bonner had come across. The kid had an uncanny knack for reading people's thoughts, as if he had some kind of sixth sense. If Quinn could keep his shit together he'd be great one day.

Greatness had eluded Tom Bonner. After thirty-two years on the job, twenty-five of them working Homicide, the party was over. In

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a few hours it would be the end of the line for him. He'd be officially put out to pasture. The lieutenant would reassign his cases and close the file on his career. It was with mixed feelings that Bonner acknowledged it was time to close the file on Lindsay Hamilton as well.

The detective reached for his wallet and slid Lindsay's photograph out of the bill compartment. The image was crinkled and worn from an unintentional soaking it had taken a few years back when his fishing boat had capsized on Clear Lake during a storm. The picture had survived with minimal damage. He was grateful, because in the past twenty years he'd looked at Lindsay's high school yearbook photo nearly as often as he'd looked at his own face in the bathroom mirror. Her hair was long and layered. The bangs were pushed away from her face, exposing a broad forehead, wide-set eyes, and lips parted in a smile. He couldn't draw worth a damn, but sometimes when he lay awake in bed at night staring at the ceiling, he could paint every detail of her face in his mind's eye as if he were some kind of Picasso.

Lindsay had been a good kid, smart, and cautious. She'd played by all the rules, which should have given her a free pass, but it hadn't. One lazy August afternoon, just shy of her sixteenth birthday, a monster had crawled through her bedroom window in her parents' modest home. He'd tied her arms and legs to the bedposts and raped her. Afterwards, as she lay helpless on her pink floral bedspread, he'd fired three rounds from a .38-caliber revolver into her chest.

It had been eighty degrees outside that day. Kids out of school for the summer played in the street. Gardeners mowed lawns. Neighbors walked dogs. Somebody should have seen that something was amiss at the Hamiltons' house, but nobody did. The body wasn't discovered until Lindsay's mother returned home from a manicure appointment, her acrylic fingernails freshly painted with deep crimson polish.

Bonner had attended Lindsay's autopsy. He would have been crazy not to go. The body told a story. It was his job to unravel it firsthand so he would have command of the facts when he nailed her killer in court. He was already a seasoned homicide detective by then, inured to death, but this had been his first case involving the murder of a child.

When he saw Lindsay's naked body laid out on the medical examiner's table with ligature marks bruising her wrists and ankles and three evenly spaced bullet holes spoiling her chest like a grotesque row of buttons, it hollowed out his insides. White-hot anger burned deep in his chest, reminding Tom Bonner that if a monster could get a girl like Lindsay Hamilton, he could get anybody, and there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it.

Over the past twenty years, Bonner's anger had mutated into a dull ache that never left him. In some dark corner of his mind, he knew that he deserved the pain, because after all his years of investigating leads and interviewing potential witnesses—over a hundred of them—he had not been able to bring Lindsay Hamilton's

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killer to justice.

More than once Bonner had been close to breakthroughs only to see promising evidence fade into the ether. Extractor marks on the bullets recovered from the scene could have identified the weapon, but the .38 was never found. A partial fingerprint on the doorjamb was too smudged to identify. A couple of years later, when DNA testing became readily available, Bonner learned that crucial evidence had inadvertently been destroyed. Bonner's hopes had eventually faded, too, replaced by a profound sense of impotence. The case was now just one of a thousand homicides that had remained unsolved since that hot August afternoon so long ago.

As Bonner's retirement approached, he had begun to sense that his entire career as a cop had been a failure. Sleep now came with difficulty or not at all. Food no longer appealed to him. He had begun to look haggard. He'd tried but failed to shake off the feeling that he was plunging down a black hole from which there was no escape. It no longer mattered that he'd cleared hundreds of other cases. It was the ones he hadn't solved that consumed his thoughts, and Lindsay Hamilton was the poster child for them all.

Bonner took a deep breath and forced himself out of his chair. He slipped Lindsay's photograph into the breast pocket of his jacket and headed toward the storage room. The nylon shoulder holster that held his 9mm Berretta was silent as he moved. As a rookie in patrol he'd hated the way his leather Sam Browne belt creaked with every movement. Noise took away the element of surprise.

Bonner felt weary as he ambled down the stairs to the basement where the detectives kept their case files. Once inside the room, he walked toward a row of open metal shelves, pulled down the first of ten boxes that held his records from the Hamilton investigation, and set it on a nearby table. As he removed the lid, a stale odor rose from the box and closed in on him like a bad dream.

He put on his reading glasses and for one last time he flipped through the pages of the murder book, even though he felt as if he could recite the entire record from memory: names, addresses, telephone numbers, alibis, and false leads.

Bonner paused for a moment to glance through the notes from his initial interview with Mrs. Hamilton. He recalled Lindsay's mother as a narcissistic piece of work. She'd remained composed during questioning even with her daughter's violated body lying in a pool of blood in the next room, surrounded by the cherished possessions of a child who had not yet transitioned into adulthood—a Barbie doll, a stuffed monkey fashioned from a gray wool sock, a pink feather boa that looked as if it had once been part of a Halloween costume. Mrs. Hamilton had signed her statement using only her thumb and index finger, as though she was afraid she might spoil her new manicure. That had raised the hairs on the back of Bonner's neck.

Mr. Hamilton was a sales rep for a clothing manufacturer. At the

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time of Lindsay's death, he claimed he'd been caught in traffic on his way to visit a client. He sweated like a pig all though his interview. His story seemed rehearsed and there weren't any tears. In a perfect world, fathers didn't kill their daughters, especially not in the way Lindsay Hamilton had been murdered, but Bonner knew that the world in which he lived was far from perfect.

The monster had subdued Lindsay by tying her wrists together with a constrictor knot. Then he lashed her wrists and ankles to the bed. From the beginning Bonner thought the knot that the killer used was an important clue. He'd interviewed anyone who might know about such things—fishermen, truckers, and longshoremen. He'd even gone so far as to call ex-wife number two, because she was addicted to a slew of crafty endeavors that involved knots like knitting, crocheting, and macramé. Bonner referred to her hobbies as "the dark arts" because she'd nearly ruined his credit buying all that crap. The marriage had eventually collapsed under the weight of her careless spending. Or perhaps the union had failed because he'd been a bad husband who had shown more passion for his work than he had for his wife. Bonner couldn't remember which it was. He supposed it didn't matter anymore.

As the Hamilton investigation progressed, Bonner had learned more than he ever wanted to know about the bowline, figure eight, and trucker's hitch. He found that cavers, climbers, and kayakers commonly used constrictor knots. Some considered it the best of the binding knots, because it was difficult if not impossible to untie, and it gripped like a boa constrictor. Because of that, Bonner began referring to Lindsay's killer as the Snake. He had a hunch there was a connection between the knot and the Hamiltons. He just had to find it.

At the beginning, there was no shortage of suspects. Lindsay had a thirteen-year-old brother named Brian. The kid was a Boy Scout for a while. Mr. Hamilton was the leader of his troop. Brian had earned a merit badge for knot-tying, but neither father nor son could remember if the troop had learned the constrictor knot.

Lindsay went to school with a punk named Gavin Jenkins who'd pursued her until she told him to take a hike. Classmates claimed he wasn't happy about the snub. At sixteen the kid already had an impressive rap sheet. Detectives in Juvenile suspected he was the ringleader in a wave of burglaries that had plagued the neighborhood. In at least one of the break-ins a couple of handguns had been taken, including a 9mm Glock and .38 Smith & Wesson revolver. The Glock was later used in a bank robbery in New Mexico, but the .38 was never recovered. Bonner suspected Jenkins was capable of almost anything, even murdering Lindsay Hamilton.

Bonner tracked down a man who'd been seen in the neighborhood that day selling magazines door-to-door. He also interviewed the driver who delivered water to the neighbor across the street and the Hamiltons' mail carrier, an odd duck named Ed Mason, a

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second-generation Postal Service employee. Mason piqued Bonner's interest after the detective learned that the constrictor knot was related to bag, sack, and miller's knots, all of which are used to seal a variety of cloth containers, including mailbags. Mason also had guns, but they were all registered and none was a .38. His neighbor once accused him of stealing a pair of her red panties from the clothesline. Both Mason and his wife had denied the accusation. The neighbor's account had been further discredited after Bonner discovered that she was taking medication for some kind of mental disorder.

The Hamiltons' gardener, Ernie Sanchez, had done time in state prison for both armed robbery and sexual assault. He'd joined a prison gang called *La Nuestra Familia.* While he was incarcerated his family moved back to Mexico, leaving him with nothing but an old truck. As soon as he was released he rehabbed the junker, bought a lawn mower, and started servicing clients. The first thing Bonner noticed when he interviewed Sanchez was that his hedge trimmer was tied to the metal frame of his rig with a rolling hitch. It wasn't a constrictor knot, but it was close. There was no way of confirming if Sanchez owned a .38 revolver. Ex-cons don't leave a paper trail by buying weapons at Wal-Mart. They get them on the street and they're generally stolen. Sanchez hadn't been arrested since getting out of prison, but Bonner suspected that was simply because he just hadn't been caught yet.

Bonner had interviewed others close to the family, including friends, neighbors, classmates, Mr. Hamilton's clients and coworkers, and members of the upscale gym where Mrs. Hamilton spent three afternoons a week maintaining her size six figure. Everyone painted a picture of a perfect, happy family like the ones you used to see on 1950s TV shows. To Bonner, the Hamiltons seemed too perfect. There had to be a crack in the façade somewhere.

As Bonner mused over the box of records in the storage room, the sound of footsteps startled him back to reality. He glanced down the hallway and saw Matthew Quinn walking toward him. Quinn was over six feet tall, a good-looking kid who had played college football and still ran every day to stay in shape. He'd attracted his share of admirers at the station, from women working in administration to female officers, but he'd never given any of them a reason to hope. He was married and the straightest arrow in the quiver.

As Quinn approached, Bonner quickly slipped Lindsay's photograph out of his jacket pocket and into the murder book. Then he returned the book to the box and closed the lid.

"Hey, partner," Quinn said. "Need a ride to the party?"

"Nah. I'll meet you there. Have to take care of a few loose ends first."

"I see you're going in uniform."

Tom Bonner smiled, something he rarely did these days. He often got ribbed about his wardrobe, which was always some variation of what he was wearing today—black slacks and shirt, a charcoal

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sports jacket, and a black-and-grey necktie. He'd been accused of dressing like an undertaker, but he didn't care. When you're at a crime scene crawling around on your hands and knees looking for a hair or a cigarette butt or anything that could help you crack a case, you don't want to be wearing a white linen suit.

"Can't change my stripes this late in the game," Bonner said.

"Let me guess where you'll be tomorrow," Quinn went on. "Fishing."

Bonner wasn't sure how much time had passed since his partner had spoken, but at some point he looked up and noticed that Quinn was staring at him. Bonner didn't want to arouse his partner's suspicion, so he gave himself permission to lie.

"Yup. Heading to Mammoth first thing in the morning."

Bonner watched as his partner's gaze slowly shifted toward the boxes marked "Hamilton." Quinn frowned. Tom Bonner knew the kid worried about his dark moods. He'd tried to get Bonner to talk about what was bothering him. A couple of times, he'd even stopped by Bonner's house—unannounced—to check on him.

Quinn gestured toward the box. "You trying to solve the Hamilton case before you go?"

Bonner tried for an ironic chuckle, which he suspected fell short of its goal. Everybody in the station knew he *had* solved the Hamilton case. He knew the Snake's identity, knew in his heart after all these years that the guy was guilty. The problem was, not all truth could be proven. That knowledge, more than any other, was propelling him toward that deep, dark hole.

Quinn put his hand on Bonner's shoulder. "Don't worry, Tom. Something will break eventually. When it does, you'll be the first person we call."

Bonner appreciated the sentiment, but knew it was bullshit. Once he retired, nobody was going to waste a dime calling him for help with anything, especially since the decision he'd recently made would render that sort of call impossible.

Bonner nodded, and the tension in Quinn's facial muscles eased.

"I'll see you at the restaurant in a few," Quinn said, "and try not to look too happy."

Not a problem, Bonner thought. He hadn't felt happy in a long time.

As soon as his partner left, Bonner replaced the box on the shelf. The party wasn't scheduled to start for another half-hour, but there was nothing left for him to do here. No reason to stick around the station any longer. He returned to the squad room and loaded the few personal items he kept at his desk into a trashcan liner. Maybe he'd drive to the restaurant and have a Coke at the bar before making his grand entrance.

Bonner didn't drink anymore, but he used to. In the early years of Lindsay Hamilton's homicide investigation, nearly every day after work he'd buy a six-pack and head to the Snake's house. He'd sit in the car, pop the top on a beer can, and watch the house for

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hours, waiting for Snake to make a mistake. He never had. Bonner had eventually been forced to give up his off-duty vigils of Snake's house just about the time he'd been forced to give up alcohol.

Bonner hefted the trashcan liner over his shoulder and headed for the parking lot where he'd left his ten-year-old Lincoln Continental. Once inside the car he paused to inhale a ghostly whiff of cigarette smoke. He had recently quit smoking, too. Now he found himself yearning for a cigarette and wondering why he'd bothered to give them up. As soon as Bonner pulled into traffic, he realized he was heading away from the party and toward the freeway. Perhaps it was better this way. Why delay the inevitable?

Traffic was light and twenty minutes later Bonner pulled the Lincoln up to the curb in front of the house and turned off the ignition. He forced himself out of the car, not bothering to lock the door. He made his way to a flowerpot that stood near the side door, tilting it to one side to retrieve the key. He knew it was a bad idea to leave a house key outside. It was an invitation for bad guys to step inside and help themselves. But the key was a convenience, especially when you locked yourself out of the house. Bonner had learned that lesson firsthand back in the days when he drank too much. Besides, this key had been lying unmolested under the pot for years.

Bonner unlocked the door and stepped inside. The house was dark and smelled of dusty furniture and dirty dishes left too long in the sink. Both signaled that a woman no longer lived here. Despite the odors, he decided against opening a window. He didn't want to disturb the neighbors. He hadn't had a drink in a long time, but tonight he felt like having a pick-me-up. He opened the refrigerator door and found a beer waiting for him. He twisted the cap off the bottle, took a swig, and then walked into the living room, where he sat in the easy chair in front of the TV, quietly reflecting on what he was about to do.

He wondered what it was like to die. Did you find yourself standing before a tunnel bathed in white light with your loved ones beckoning for you to cross over some imaginary line? Or was it just like in the movies? Fade to black and then—*finito.*

Bonner had thought long and hard about his decision. While he was still on the job he would not have contemplated such an act. It would have brought negative attention to the department, something he would not have allowed himself to do. Now he was no longer on the team. The prospect of ending his overwhelming feelings of hopelessness outweighed any loyalty issues he may have once had. On balance, he knew he'd made the right decision.

He reached beneath his jacket, slid the Berretta from its holster, and laid it on his thigh. He'd have only one shot. His aim had to be perfect. He didn't want any hand-wringing over a brain-dead survivor. He wondered if his party had started yet, if anybody had noticed that the guest of honor wasn't there. Quinn would notice, of course, but by the time his partner's curiosity transitioned into con-

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cern it would be too late.

Bonner hoisted the gun and racked the slide. A moment later, he heard the sound of a car and saw headlights pierce the thin curtains of the living room windows. He tensed, wondering if it was a neighbor turning around in the driveway. The headlights went out. His pulse thundered in his ears as he heard the sound of footsteps slowly moving up the sidewalk, stopping at the front door.

Bonner's holster was silent as he leaned forward straining to hear if the person would go away. Perhaps he had aroused his partner's suspicion back at the station and Quinn *had* followed him here. Damn nosy kid. It would just be Bonner's luck to have him spoil the plan now.

A moment later the door swung open. For an instant Bonner froze as light flooded the room.

"What the hell? How'd you get—"

"Hey, Snake. Party's over."

Bonner saw Ed Mason's eyes open wide in terror as he aimed the Berretta at the mail carrier's heart and fired.●

by Bill Crider

Sherlockians (and everybody else) will enjoy Scott Monty's *The Baker Street Blog* (**http://www.bakerstreetblog.com**), which contains all sorts of delightful Sherlockian tidbits and sometimes their relationship to current events. Monty is also the webmaster for another recommended Holmes site, *The Baker Street Journal* (**http://www.bakerstreetjournal.com**). The *Journal* is "the preeminent publication of scholarship about Sherlock Holmes." Bonus: the site has a link to "I Hear of Sherlock Everywhere," a podcast from "a world where it's always 1895." Monty and Burt Wolder talk about everything that's new related to Sherlock: historical issues, current events, or anything else. Required listening for Sherlockians and informative for everybody.

I read Bill Peschel's blog regularly. His *Writer's Almanac* (**http://www.planetpeschel.com**) has all kinds of information for the day it's published, including names of writers who were born on that date and writers who died on that date. It has a Quote of the Day, and a section of always interesting links.

Readers of this magazine should be well acquainted with Steve Hockensmith, whose blog can be found at his website (**http://www.stevehockensmith.com**). He doesn't blog as regularly as I'd like but when he does, he always has **(continued on p. 80)**

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A Run Through the Calendar

by Jon L. Breen

Jon L. Breen has been *EQMM*'s book reviewer for decades, and over the years he has also contributed a number of original short stories to this magazine, including pastiches and parodies of classic mystery writers. He favors the traditional mystery for his own creative work—mostly fairly clued whodunits. A retired librarian, he currently lives in Fountain Valley, California, with his wife Rita.

Detectives Berwanger and Foley enjoyed speaking to groups, and the department enjoyed letting them. They put a human face on law enforcement, and they could adjust their delivery to any audience, from grade school kids to college students, from service clubs to writers' groups. Eventually, their presentation, set up like a two-man comedy act, became so famous locally that they were in constant demand. "We'd like to schedule a police speaker for our next meeting," callers to the department's community relations desk would say. "But only if it's Berwanger and Foley." The chief had offered more than once to let them switch full-time to P.R. duties, but the longtime partners demurred, insisting that unless they continued to work cases on the street, they could no longer claim to be cops.

"Keeps the act fresh," Foley said.

Berwanger was the lead talker, Foley the designated interrupter. Their favorite kind of audience, next to the school kids, was published and prospective mystery writers who wanted the real low-down on police procedure. On this particular evening, before an eager group of thirty such, they were in top form.

"Every cop knows there's no such thing as a whodunit in real life," Detective Berwanger pontificated. "There are cases where you don't know who did it, sure. There are cases, too many of them, where you *never* find out who did it, but not cases where

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you have four or five equal suspects to choose among like in a story."

"There was the Fitzgerald case," Foley said, poker-faced.

Berwanger looked at his partner as if annoyed by the interruption, then smiled at the audience as if to say, Look what I have to put up with. "Well, that was close, I'll grant you, but not really a whodunit for long. I mean, we wrapped it up pretty fast, didn't we?"

Foley shrugged, and his partner took it as permission to continue. "Now another thing you don't get in real life is the so-called dying message. I don't mean to suggest there haven't been cases where somebody gets to the victim just as he's popping off and he manages to gasp out the name of the person who killed him, or even to write something down with his last ounce of energy. Sure, that'll happen—not very often, but it stands to reason it'll happen sometimes. But in a case like that, the victim wants to make it clear, or what's the point? Cases where the victim leaves some kind of cryptic message you have to puzzle out—well, let's just say I've never known it to happen."

"Except in the Fitzgerald case," Foley said.

Berwanger paused and glared at his partner in mock irritation. "Technically, that wasn't really a dying message. The point I'm making, ladies and gentlemen, is that when you write your fiction and guys like us are reading it, we accept the conventions of the genre you're writing in—"

"What's a genre?" Foley asked.

"Please, don't embarrass me. My point is, we know you're going to have multiple suspects and esoteric clues, and we'll go along with you happily as readers, just so long as you don't make any serious errors in police procedure. That's when you'll lose us. And that's what we came to talk about tonight. Now does anybody have any questions?"

A hand shot up in the first row.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Tell us about the Fitzgerald case."

Berwanger turned to his partner with a puzzled expression. "Why would they want to know about the Fitzgerald case?"

Foley shrugged. "It was kind of interesting."

"But not at all typical of our work." He sighed with exaggerated resignation. "Still, if that's what you want, I'll give you a rundown on the Fitzgerald case. Bernard Fitzgerald was CEO of his own software company and an extremely wealthy man. Early in the company's history, he pretty much quit coming to the office, working almost entirely from home. He managed to keep full control of every aspect of his operation by computer or telephone. The first week in July a couple of years ago, he was found murdered in his home office at about five o'clock in the afternoon. His housekeeper,

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who had been out shopping, found him seated at his desk in front of his computer screen. The latest company sales graph, covering the last year, was kind of lying on the computer keyboard, as if he'd been studying it when he died. There was a gaping hole in his forehead, which proved to be made by a slug from a .45-caliber handgun. The weapon was not on the scene.

"Our crime-scene team were able to gather several pieces of physical evidence. When a recently fired weapon was found later in the home of our suspect, technicians were able to match the slug found in Mr. Fitzgerald with others test-fired from that same weapon through markings on the slug picked up on its trip through the bore of the gun. The tech folks call these lands and grooves, sort of like stalactites and stalagmites. The suspect was also tested for GSR—that's gunshot residue—and could be shown to have fired a gun. Unless you're writing a historical, never have your fictional cops do a paraffin test—that went out with rubber hoses—and whatever you do, don't have your cop pick up the weapon with a pencil stuck in the barrel. That could mess up the lands and grooves and make future ballistic testing pointless. It'd be as bad as having your cops stop for doughnuts every other chapter."

"I like doughnuts," Foley said.

Berwanger looked at his partner pityingly and continued. "While our suspect had cleaned up after committing the crime, we were able to find microscopic blood residue on the suspect's clothing that matched that of the victim. To summarize, by the time we went to trial in the Fitzgerald case, the proper suspect had been brought to book by solid routine police work. Are there any more questions?"

Several hands were in the air, and two of the audience spoke at once.

"Where was the whodunit?"

"What was the dying message?"

Berwanger sighed in comic exasperation. "That won't help you keep your police procedure authentic, and that's what we're here for."

"Better tell 'em the whole story," Foley said, "or they'll never invite us again."

"Okay, okay, if you insist. The last message his secretary got from Fitzgerald, at four in the afternoon, was that he had an appointment with a relative, so would be out of touch for a while. He didn't name the relative but said something really strange. He said it was somebody who ran through the calendar. The secretary told us he often made funny little remarks like that, so it was nothing out of the ordinary. He liked to pull people's chains over unimportant things, though if anything was really important he'd make it crystal clear. He was a puzzle fan, she said, did the news-

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paper crossword every morning before he did anything else.

"Now, like I said, Fitzgerald was very, very rich, but he had no children of his own and no living siblings. He did have two nieces and two nephews who would share equally in the bulk of his estate when he kicked off. Naturally, they all had an obvious motive and were the first people we wanted to check out." Berwanger turned to his partner. "Okay, Foley, you've been standing there so smug, kibitzing and watching your partner sweat. Here's where you get to go to work." He turned back to the audience. "My partner's quite an actor. He can do good cop or bad cop with a minimum of preparation, and he does the greatest drag act you ever saw at the annual Bluecoat Follies. In the interrogations to follow, I will be me, and Foley will take the role of the person being interrogated."

Berwanger cleared his throat. "We first visited the victim's nephew, Barry. No, not Barry Fitzgerald, Barry Montgomery, the son of one of Fitzgerald's sisters." He turned to Foley. "You have a very nice place here, Mr. Montgomery."

"Why, thank you, Officer. I certainly like it." Foley had transformed himself into a smiling, ingratiating go-getter bristling with nervous energy.

"When did you last speak with your uncle?"

"Oh, must have been last Christmas. We were on good terms, but we weren't often in touch."

"What sort of work do you do, Mr. Montgomery?"

"I'm in advertising. Account executive with Weedham and Reap, here in the city."

"You've been pretty successful at it?"

"I think so. Have you seen the ads for Happy Rest Funeral Park? Their slogan, 'Quality of Life, Even in Death'? That's one of mine."

"You must be doing pretty well. Is that an original Andy Warhol on your wall?"

"Yes, it is."

"Have much debt?"

"Well, some, like anybody else these days. Ex-wife, you know how that is."

"Actually, I don't. So were you at your office Thursday afternoon?"

"No, I had the day off. I was at the movies all day."

"Can you prove that?"

"Gee, I don't know."

"Did anyone see you?"

"I was alone, and I didn't see anybody I knew. I can show you my ticket stub."

Foley pantomimed passing something to Berwanger, who examined it. "This shows you went to see *Million Dollar Baby* at twelve-thirty P.M. Figure ten minutes for trailers. That picture

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runs maybe two hours. You're out well before three o'clock, and your uncle wasn't killed until after four."

"I didn't leave the movie theater until five-thirty."

"But your ticket says—"

"Look, after the first movie, I went in to see another one, okay?"

"And did you buy a ticket for that one?"

"Of course not. Look, you know what these multiplexes are like. They never check which movie you bought a ticket for. It's no big deal to sneak into a second movie or even a third. They don't care. They make all their money off concessions anyway."

"I guess that's right. So you had something to eat at the movie?"

"Hell, no. I'm not paying those prices."

"Mr. Montgomery, your uncle told his secretary he had an appointment with a relative who ran through the calendar. Does that mean anything to you?"

"Well, I guess we all run through the calendar, don't we? Working our tails off from January to December? But it has no special meaning to me. You might check out my cousin Vera, though. You'll enjoy it, even if it's a dead end."

At that point, Detective Foley, without donning any drag, changed from hyperactive adman to indignant young woman very conscious of her beauty.

"Miss Willing, to begin with I have to ask: Is that your real name?"

"Yes, it's my real name, Vera Willing, and I know what you're getting at. You think I'm some kind of sex pro, like a stripper or porno actress or prostitute or something. Well, I'm not. I'm really a very modest person. Taking off my clothes for a magazine layout in *Pentup* was an honor, a well-paid compliment to me and my body, but it was a one-time thing. Do you realize how many women from all walks of life have posed for *Pentup?* And I assure you it was done in extremely good taste. It was very classy."

"To get to the point, at the time your uncle died, he said he had an appointment with a relative who ran through the calendar. We've been trying to figure out what that means, and someone suggested that you were Miss January two years ago in *Pentup.*"

"Who suggested that? Which one of my worthless cousins suggested that to you?"

"Does it matter which one?"

"It might. If somebody is trying to throw suspicion on other people, it could mean they're trying to throw suspicion off themselves, couldn't it? I've read a few books, you know. But let me say two things to that accusation. Number one, I didn't have to make an appointment to talk to Uncle Barney. He was crazy about me, and I could just drop in and talk to him any time I wanted. Number two, I was Miss January in *Pentup,* in the issue, yeah, and then I was Miss January again in their calendar. But I was

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only January and I've never done another *Pentup* pinup, and I've never done another calendar or another girl of the month in any other magazine. So having my toe in January isn't exactly running *through* the calendar, now is it?"

"Where were you Thursday afternoon?"

"Working, all right?"

"Working where?"

"At home. I'm an artist. I was painting a picture."

"Of what?"

"There's no easy answer to that. It's an abstract. I could show you."

"Wouldn't prove anything. Did anyone see you?"

"No."

"If your uncle's remark about running through the calendar didn't refer to you, who could it have referred to?"

"You might talk to my sister Esther, the judge." Detective Foley registered sibling resentment. "She runs through a court calendar every day of her life!"

Berwanger turned back to the audience. "That sent us to the chambers of Judge Esther Willing at the Superior Court building."

Changing persona again, Foley spoke before he was asked a question. "Let me tell you officers something: I believe the rights of a citizen are sacred. If you want a search warrant, you'd better have a good reason. I wasn't elected to this office so I could be a rubber stamp on a police fishing expedition. Is that clear?"

"Quite clear, Your Honor. But we're not here to request a warrant. It's about your uncle's death."

"Oh, that. I had very little to do with my uncle, but of course I shall answer your questions fully and completely."

"Where were you the afternoon he was killed?"

"In court."

"Did anyone see you?"

"Oh, the bailiff, the court reporter, twelve jurors, four alternates, a defendant, a bunch of lawyers for both sides, a few cranks who come to watch the show every day. That's about all."

Berwanger turned to the audience. "In short, Judge Willing was the only relative with an apparently solid alibi, but we weren't through with her." He turned back to Foley. "Your Honor, before your uncle died, he referred to meeting with a relative who ran through the calendar. That could refer to the court calendar, couldn't it?"

"I suppose it could, but Detectives, I do not *run* through the calendar. Ask anyone in this building if I am known for undue haste in fulfilling my duties. They will tell you just the opposite is the case, and some of them find my tendency to deliberation rather annoying. Now, I do have to get back to the courtroom. Is there anything else?"

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"Can you imagine what else your uncle might have meant?"

She shook her head. "As an officer of the court, I would help you if I could. But as a member of the family, I'm glad that I can't."

"There was one more relative to see," Berwanger said, "Jason Fitzgerald." He turned back to Detective Foley, who had cast off his feminine mannerisms. "Mr. Fitzgerald, you work in radio, is that right?"

"Yes, that's right." Foley had deepened his voice an octave to sound like a radio person.

"Does it pay well?"

"If you're Howard Stern or Rush Limbaugh, maybe. For most of us, it's about on a par with being a grocery-store manager."

"At least you're not at box-boy level."

"Well, I was when I started out. I've done it all on radio, at every kind of station. Commercial, noncommercial. Every kind of assignment, too. News, sports, interviews, telephone talk. Mostly playing music, though—rock, country-western, jazz, classical, you name it. I enjoy it. My wants are simple."

"Ever do any TV?"

He shook his head. "Face for radio, as they say."

"Can you tell us where you were the afternoon your uncle was killed?"

"Well, let's see. My on-air shift ended at noon. I had a little lunch at a place near the station. They know me there, but I left by two o'clock. I came home and meditated."

"Can you prove that?"

"Only if you have a way of probing my quest for enlightenment. I was alone the whole time. Nobody called, or if anybody did, I'd let the answering machine take it."

"Any idea what your uncle's comment about running through the calendar meant?"

"Not a clue."

Berwanger turned back to the audience. "But it was a clue. Foley and I were sure of that. After interviewing them all, we returned to the crime scene and took another look at something that was found right smack in the middle of Fitzgerald's desk at the time he died and I noticed something—"

"I noticed it," Foley said.

"Well, maybe you noticed it, but I interpreted it."

"Once I noticed it, interpreting it was easy."

Berwanger clenched his teeth as if submerging a caustic remark. "Working in tandem as a good partnership should, we noticed Fitzgerald's sales graph. It had the dollar business levels along the side, the months of the year across the bottom, and it covered the last year. This, you'll remember, was July."

"That's important," Foley said.

"So the first month represented across the bottom of the graph

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was July of the previous year, and the months were indicated by their initial letter."

"You guys are mystery writers," Foley said. "You should be able to get this."

"It's a challenge to the sitter," Berwanger said. "If you have something to write with and on—and as writers, you should—just put the first letter of each month beginning with J for July, A for August, and so forth, and see what you get."

Most of the writers in the room followed instructions, and most of them had the following on their pads: JASONDJFMAMJ.

"Anybody get it?"

"Yeah," said a booming voice from the front row. "His nephew Jason was a disc jockey, that is, a DJ, and he worked on all kinds of radio stations, so he probably worked at both FM and AM stations. So Jason and his credits run right through the calendar!"

"That's it. He was the suspect we zeroed in on, and he was the one tried and convicted for his uncle's murder."

"But what does that last J mean?"

"Justice?" Foley suggested.

Berwanger shook his head. "In fiction, maybe you'd have to explain that last J. We didn't. Once we got a search warrant for Jason's apartment, we found the weapon and it wasn't too late to get him tested for GSR. In the end, we had more evidence than we needed, just the kind of forensic stuff juries demand these days if you expect them to convict. And we wrapped the thing up only a day after the murder was committed through good, sound, dogged police work. So, as you can see, that wasn't really much like a fictional murder case at all."

"Sounds like one to me," Foley said.

"No, not a bit. If it were fiction, the killer had to be the judge. She was the only one with a perfect alibi, right?"

A hand was up.

"Yes, sir."

"Detective Berwanger, did you guys make that one up?"

"Heck, no. We wouldn't think of encroaching on your territory. You guys make up the stories. We just protect and serve."●

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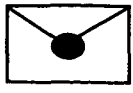

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Art by Mark Evan Walker

WILD WALLS

by Loren D. Estleman

Chub Garrett sat in his favorite pub in the Dublin suburb of Maynooth, drinking gin and bitters and mourning the smoky atmosphere of days gone by.

"Sure, it was poisonous, and they were quite right downtown to vote in the ban," he said. "My only complaint is it takes twice as long to kill yourself with booze. But I'm an outsider; my opinion doesn't count. I only live here because artists don't have to pay income tax. Uncle Sam glommed on to what was left after my dear parents and darling ex-wives robbed me blind."

Valentino didn't know whether to chuckle at that. Chub—right name William, before his trademark babyfat cheeks had made him the most recognizable of the Pint-Size Pirates in a series of 1930s comedy shorts—appeared to have no sense of humor. This wasn't unusual among gifted comics, who in their private lives could pose for posters for anti-depression research. Wattles spilled over his heavy turtleneck and he wore loose-fitting khakis and rubber Wellingtons. His guest, who was suffering from jet lag brought on by two long hops, from L.A. to New York and from New York to Ireland, would have chosen brighter company if Chub ("Don't call me

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Mr. Garrett, son; that was my father, may he rot in hell") weren't sitting on a film archivist's goldmine.

"You seem to have done all right for yourself since then," Valentino said. "Homes in Santa Fe and Ireland, royalties for your signature line of children's fashions."

"The royalties barely cover both mortgages. I could liquidate and live quite comfortably for the time I have left. Only I can't, because both properties are frozen solid until I can prove I'm not an imbecile. Bad luck for me, good luck for you. The courts overlooked the product of my art."

In this twelfth Valentino adventure, the UCLA film detective takes on the subject of child stardom, and travels farther afield than usual—to Ireland—to try to acquire some valuable comic film footage. As usual, Valentino's investigating ends up extending beyond the realm of film, for the owner of the movies is soon charged with murder. The first Valentino novel, *Frames*, will be published by Forge in May 2008.

He used the word with irony; but "art" was what Valentino thought of those reels of safety stock Chub maintained in climate-controlled storage in Dublin: the entire existing run of Pint-Size Pirates comedies, unseen in their original state since long before Valentino was born. In the meantime the world had had to content itself with grainy prints butchered to make room for commercials during afternoon TV airings and late shows. The UCLA board of directors had been persuaded to foot his travel bill to procure the films for a reasonable price. Valentino himself had done the persuading. The loss of so valuable a collection of artifacts to the history of popular entertainment would have cast in shadow all his efforts to preserve the twentieth century's past to date.

Chub drank, spilling color briefly into his sallow octogenarian features. "I wanted to will them to the Smithsonian, but my damn doctors are determined to keep me alive past a hundred, and I don't intend to spend that time in a nursing home. Eleven children from eight marriages are just as keen to declare me incompetent and divvy up my estate. I need cash to fight them in court, which is why I'm being so mule-ass stubborn about the asking price."

"It's worth it, in my opinion, but it's not my hand on the purse strings. If the university were to agree to your terms, it means passing up the next three ex-presidents speaking at commencement. They don't come cheap. The way they look at it, settling for a former secretary of state would mean accepting second-class status behind Harvard. Would you accept an honorary Ph.D. in lieu of the difference?"

"I already have two, from USC and Penn State. Not bad for a kid

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who bribed his tutors to give him a passing grade in math so he could play David Copperfield on radio. I think Edith took both diplomas when she cleaned out the house in Burbank. She sold them on eBay, along with my honorary Oscar. One more wouldn't get me a GED. So I guess you know my answer."

Edith was Chub's sixth wife. He'd had two more before one stuck, for fifteen years until she'd died. "That's all I can offer," Valentino said. "I might swing you an honorarium as a visiting lecturer. The film school's slim on those from the classic age."

"That's only because Jackie Coogan had the bad taste to die. I couldn't accept anything less than a hundred grand. That's the standard retainer for the legal talent I need. I can get two weeks out of it."

"The people I work with won't go that high." He felt as played out as anyone who had ever embarked upon a crusade, only to settle for less than a lousy T-shirt. He wondered if a side trip to London might yield an acceptable print of *Lassie Come Home*. Roddy McDowall, before he died, had given him hope that one still existed in the basement of an assistant director on Basil Street.

"I like you," Chub said, thumping down his glass. "If I agree to a private showing, do you think your people might reconsider?"

"I'd kill for it. But I couldn't say yes in good conscience. Chub, I'm a fan."

Chub Garrett, the brains of the Pint-Size Pirates, stewed over the question, glass in hand. Despite his bald head and age spots, he remained an icon of Valentino's youth, the mischievous savant of a band of juvenile delinquents with the best of comedic intentions. While he was considering, a plump, buxom barmaid—she ran so true to type that no pangs of liberated shame entered into the choice of terminology—came over and offered them a pint on the house, in deference to Chub's good reputation. A twinkle of old times sparked in the old man's pale blue eyes, but he asked her for the bill. Valentino covered it with a five-pound note.

"Boyo, you couldn't have settled it better with a knighthood." The former child star hoisted himself from his seat. "Let's go see just how cruel the passage of time can be to a boy from the Lower East Side."

Chub drove, at the wheel of a stubby little car with a windscreen close enough to bend Valentino's eyelashes, his fingers clutching the dash on the left side where the steering wheel belonged, oncoming traffic threatening him from the wrong lane, explosions from the exhaust pipe farting black smoke, and the driver using his horn in preference to the brake. When they rocked to a stop in front of a charming ivy-jacketed cottage straight out of *The Quiet Man,* the passenger unclamped his fingers from vinyl and remarked upon the beauty of the place.

"I'll take credit for that," Chub said. "Me and Miles, my

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groundskeeper. It was overgrown with thistles when I bought it and hired him from the village. He's got enough poison stored in the old smokehouse to wipe out the British Army."

The interior of the cottage was open, the stone-paved medieval kitchen flowing into a comfortably furnished living room. The rotund host manipulated hidden switches, lowering a screen from the ceiling in front of a painting of peasants at work in a field and raising a bullet-shaped projector from inside a table between two leather armchairs.

Valentino enjoyed immensely the next two hours. Chub had spliced seven Pint-Size Pirates shorts onto four reels, and his guest laughed loudly throughout: Chub, in his trademark letter sweater and shabby fedora, "Sassafrass," the group's poker-faced spokesman, Glory, a ten-year-old glamour queen, and Shadow and Moon Pie, the stereotypical black children, outsmarted Mugs, the swaggering bully, at every turn, frequently with results humiliating and messy for the slow-witted antagonist. Alonzo, the Pirates' scruffy little dog, was always on hand to lick custard pie off Mugs's face. Every member of the cast was a gifted comic and, disregarding the shuffling behavior of the two minority members, their performances would stand up against any on the modern screen. Valentino had always enjoyed the features on cable, mutilated as they had been, but seeing them as they were intended to be seen was like spending quality time with the *Mona Lisa,* only with pratfalls.

The old man switched off the projector and turned on a lamp. "I went into debt snapping up the prints when the studio went under and transferring them to safety stock, but I made it back in a hurry renting them to local TV stations across the country. I was smart enough to dupe off copies, knowing how scissor-simple those affiliates can be. I tried to get Bernie to go in with me on it, to reduce the outlay, but he was still hemming and hawing when he died."

Bernard Leibowitz was Sassafrass.

"He was killed, wasn't he?

"He got himself into a crooked pool game in Tijuana, as if there were any other kind down there. He squawked and somebody knifed him. What a waste."

The curse of child stardom had stalked most of the Pint-Size Pirates later in life. Edward Washington, Moon Pie, had overdosed on heroin, and Shadow, born Toby Goss, had died fighting in Korea. The last Valentino had heard, Gerald "Mugs" McDermott was in prison for armed robbery. He might have died inside.

"What about Glory?"

"Gloria," Chub said, smiling. "Sweet girl. She had a weakness for musicians. She married a drummer who beat her like his traps,

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then divorced him and took up with a saxophonist who liked to wear her underthings. That was a happy marriage, I heard. Anyway, he died. I still got Christmas cards from Gloria until a couple of years ago. Maybe she's dead, too. The reporters who write obituaries don't always keep up on faded celebrities."

"You came out all right."

No trace of a smile remained on his broad features. "I managed to give divorce a bad name, peed away several fortunes, and unleashed eleven ungrateful children on a world that wasn't in short supply to begin with. My own granddaughter's the ringleader of the bunch that wants to stick me in a droolarium. She doesn't even want my money for herself. She's bleached her daughter's hair, put her in braces, enrolled her in charm school, and is paying a speech therapist to—get this—give her a lisp. Six years old and she's starred in six commercials on national TV. Blame that on me, too. If I hadn't been such a pre-pubescent success, Melanie would never have got that idea in her head. At least none of the others managed to screw up two generations."

"Judy Garland died of a deadly cocktail. The girl from *Diff'rent Strokes* stuck up a video store and committed suicide. Robert Blake, Little Beaver, stood trial for murder. All child stars. It's not your fault."

"You know what a wild wall is?"

"A portable wall made from canvas flats for a movie set. The grips can shift it around easily to accommodate the camera. During the famous dolly shot in *The Magnificent Ambersons,* Orson Welles had them rigged to drop into place just before they came inside range. It made the house seem several times bigger than it was."

"Yeah. The *point* is, a kid raised on soundstages is different from every other kind. When you grow up used to walls moving around, you're not exactly prepared to live a stable life after they switch off the kliegs for the last time."

Chub drove him back to his hotel, a small, elderly place maintained by a plump, red-faced couple who could have joined the cast of *How Green Was My Valley,* if that picture had been shot in Ireland instead of Wales. For all Valentino knew, they entertained IRA terrorists in the basement. He preferred John Ford's Celtic paradise to the urban twenty-first-century reality.

He opened his door and turned to shake Chub's hand. "I'll do my best with the university brass. Can I reach you at home tomorrow?"

"Come for dinner. My cook's off today, but I'll have her set out a real Irish spread."

"I don't want to impose."

"She'll be delighted. Feeding an old man's finicky appetite can't be much fun for her. If the news is good, I'll crack open a bottle of

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wine that's almost as old as I am."

"If I can make you happy, it'll be the happiest day of my life."

Chub Garrett shook his head. "I'm sorry to hear that. Take the advice of a disintegrating adolescent and start a family; one that won't turn on you the minute you start forgetting where you put your glasses."

That night Valentino placed a trunk call to California and smashed up against an accountant with the Film Preservation Department who talked in circles, coming around again and again to the same depressing sum. The man had obviously never enjoyed a movie in his life; he kept referring to Garrett as "Chubby" and thought he had something to do with the Andy Hardy series. To spare himself a restless night, Valentino programmed himself to dream about the Pint-Size Pirates, but they kept growing up on him and leading short, desperate lives.

Macaulay Culkin, Margaret O'Brien, Haley Joel Osment, Dickie Moore. There wasn't a story of true contentment in the batch, and no upbeat ending with a slide-whistle and a merry iris-out.

In the morning, two calls to London revealed the *Lassie* lead was bogus. He rented a car and toured the countryside. Swelling hills, thatched roofs, and men and women in Wellingtons herding sheep took some of the weight off his heart. Low stone walls everywhere, and not a wild one to be seen.

A large American car was parked next to Chub's squatty compact in front of the cottage. The front door was open and Valentino heard voices from inside.

"Hell's sake, Melanie, let the kid go out and play. The place is fenced and there are no snakes in Ireland."

"Shut up, you senile fool. I didn't spend an hour fixing her up to let her slip and fall into a pile of sheep dung."

"We can be civil." A man's voice, English-accented.

"That ship's sailed. He ran out on my mother when she was six."

"You want the girl to hang around for this?" Chub sounded weary.

After a pause the woman said, "Stay close to the house. And don't get dirty!"

A small-boned, grave-faced girl came out in a white dress and white shoes with a red sash tied about her waist. She had a red bow in her astonishingly yellow hair and rouge on her cheeks. When she saw Valentino she made a wide detour around him, clutching a shiny red pocketbook in both hands, and altered her course again to avoid a thick-built man trudging up the lane that led to a fieldstone building forty feet from the cottage.

The man looked a proper Irish tough, closely resembling James Cagney at sixty, in overalls, hobnail boots, and a cloth cap pulled low over his eyes. Valentino guessed this was Chub's

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groundskeeper. He tugged at his cap in greeting and continued past without speaking. At the door he removed the cap. "Would there be anythinq else, sor?"

"Did you get those potatoes to Cook?"

"Yes, sor. That's them boiling."

"Good. Thank you, Miles."

He put on his cap and turned away. Valentino watched him until he hopped over the stone fence on the far side of the farm. Over by the outbuilding—the old smokehouse, apparently—the little girl stood with her chin down, clasping her pocketbook like a shield to her chest. She seemed afraid to move.

Chub's face brightened when Valentino entered the cottage. He introduced his granddaughter, Melanie, and her solicitor, Clive Speedwell. She was a grownup version of her daughter, more conservatively dressed in a tailored tweed suit but with the same peroxided hair and too much makeup, although expertly applied. The lawyer was a sallow beanpole in Savile Row, with gold initials on his burgundy leather briefcase.

"Valentino's interviewing me for the university archives," Chub said, begging him with his eyes for affirmation. "I'm the last dodo."

Melanie said, "I wouldn't put too much faith in anything he tells you. His mind wanders."

"They're joining us for supper, a nice surprise. Speedwell's brought papers for me to sign. In return for putting everything in Melanie's name I get to live here the rest of my life instead of in a shelter for the criminally ga-ga."

"A crude distortion." The Englishman cleared his throat. "We're anxious to spare him five years of painful litigation out of the time he has left."

"Meanwhile his client sells my four acres in New Mexico to developers and I'm a prisoner here every damn wet Irish winter till pneumonia takes me. What a deal."

The cook, a rawboned woman nearly six feet tall with her black hair in a net, announced that supper was ready. Melanie went to the door and called her daughter, Laurette. Minutes later the little girl came in with stains on the knees of her stockings and a three-corner rip in her skirt.

Her mother bellowed. Laurette sobbed and covered her face with her hands, the pocketbook still clutched in one. When Melanie grasped her by the shoulders, Chub touched her arm. She wheeled on her grandfather. "Keep out of this or I'll put you in the worst home in Ireland! She has an interview with a casting director for the BBC in the morning! If she's skinned a knee, we're finished! He's cast all the street urchins he needs."

"Let's not say anything we'll regret," Speedwell said.

That set her off on a more strident plane, but the cook intervened, saying she'd help the child clean up; she had a sewing kit

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in her yarn bag, she said. Chub volunteered to serve the meal while she ushered the girl into another room.

It was an authentic Irish meal, as promised, with corned beef, cabbage, and boiled potatoes, each flavor distinct but harmonious with the others, not all mushed together as so often happened in American taverns on St. Patrick's Day; but Valentino enjoyed little of it.

His bad news from work, combined with the scene he'd just witnessed, Chub's plight, and the unconvincing story the old man had invented to cover up the offer from UCLA, had destroyed his appetite.

He felt a little better when the cook presented Laurette, looking fresh, bright, and pretty with her dress restored to respectability. Her surprised mother hugged her and pecked her on a patch of cheek not covered by rouge. All seemed well, but Valentino declined a second helping of corned beef when the cook offered it. The girl took a tiny portion and passed the platter to Melanie. Her table manners, of course, were impeccable.

Such a mood could not be sustained in that company. When the cook served cake, Melanie scolded Laurette against crumbs. Chub told Speedwell to put down his briefcase because he wouldn't sign so much as an autograph on anything that came from him or the woman he represented. Melanie tored into a litany of neglect and abandonment, he reminded her that he'd settled a huge sum upon her grandmother and paid her mother child support for twelve years, Laurette bawled. Speedwell said he was sorry that things had come to a legal-competency action. Finally Melanie complained she wasn't feeling well and the trio took its leave.

As tires snatched at the turf outside, Chub drank from his water glass. "I thought that went well, didn't you?"

"I wish I had something better to contribute." Valentino told him about his conversation with the accountant. The cook was busy washing dishes.

"Oh, well. With any luck I'll be dead before the lawyers suck me dry. Should we open that bottle of wine?"

"Not for me. I'm driving."

"Stay here tonight. You can't go home without having a genuine Irish breakfast. Sausages and eggs."

"What makes it Irish?"

"Killians instead of coffee."

"Thanks. I'm taking the first flight out tomorrow. I'm sorry I couldn't come through."

"Funny. That's the same thing I told seven wives."

His guest thanked him for his hospitality and a lifetime of entertainment and drove back to town, where he used the telephone in the hotel lobby to reserve a 7:00 A.M. flight. Packing before bed, he heard banging downstairs; some inebriated fellow,

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he supposed, looking for a bed to avoid going home to an angry wife. Then someone called his name.

From the second-floor landing outside his room he looked down on the two innkeepers, hair tousled and worn robes flung on over their nightclothes, standing with Chub Garrett at the base of the staircase. The old man was dressed as Valentino had left him. The hotel guest told his hosts it was all right. They shuffled back to their quarters, muttering in Gaelic. Valentino went down.

Chub's face was crimson; he was breathing heavily, and before the other cleared the last step he lunged forward and seized him by both arms in a grip Valentino'd have considered impossible for a man his age. "I accept UCLA's offer. How soon can you put a check in my hands?"

"Are you all right? Is it your health?"

"I asked you a question."

"It's daytime there. I suppose I can have the accountant fax me a letter of credit to a bank in Dublin. Why the change of heart?"

"Criminal attorneys like their money up front."

Valentino heard the sirens then, the insolent European kind, razzing off the sufaces of buildings as they neared the hotel.

"PIRATE" PINCHED! crowed the headline on the first tabloid to hit the street. Beneath it, a preteen Chub Garrett in costume gripping prison bars in *Jail Jitters* appeared beside a color shot of a drained-looking old man being ushered in handcuffs up the steps of the local police station.

Valentino, who had caught very little sleep after Chub had been taken from the hotel, bought the paper from a stall and assembled at last a snarled course of events into a coherent, if highly sensationalized, narrative:

Shortly after returning to her hotel from her ugly encounter with Chub, Melanie, his granddaughter, fell violently ill. Within minutes of admission to St. Christopher's Hospital, she'd died of what the attending physician theorized at first was acute food poisoning, but which the results of tests conducted in the emergency room determined was strychnine. After hearing her daughter Laurette's half-hysterical account of her mother's evening, police went to Chub's cottage, where while they were talking with his cook, the master of the house went out a back door and drove away in his small car. The police pursued him to Valentino's hotel, where they arrested him for suspicion of homicide.

Further investigation found a large supply of strychnine among the herbicides and vermin-killers in jars on shelves in the smokehouse behind the cottage. Although everyone in the house, including the cook, Miles the groundskeeper, and Chub himself had access to the key to the outbuilding on its ring near the front door, the circumstances of Chub's relationship with Melanie, together

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with his flight when the police went to interview him, made him the chief suspect in her death. Outsiders were dismissed from consideration; the smokehouse was kept locked and the poisons were beyond arm's reach of the tiny window.

Valentino read the article in installments at stops on his way to the bank in busy Dublin, where he exchanged his letter of credit for a cashier's check. Back at the suburban jail, he was denied admittance to see the prisoner, but a sergeant gave him the name of the barrister who'd agreed to represent Chub at his arraignment. Back to Dublin Valentino went.

Weylin Fain, whose powdered wig and black robes hung on a peg in his office of glass and chrome, was too prominent in his profession to soil his hands with money. A large, dark man, built like a potato farmer, he instructed his secretary to take the check and give Valentino a receipt. Despite the man's imperious manner, the film archivist was impressed by his industry. After less than four hours on the case he seemed to know more than anyone else involved.

"Mr. Garrett seems quite taken with you," he said in his trilling Northern brogue. "He's instructed me to be as open with you as with himself. I'm sure you know how bad things look."

Valentino balanced himself on the edge of a sling chair facing the desk. "I'm a lifelong fan, but my experience with celebrities prevents me from being blinded by their public image. He's innocent. His own grandchild? No way."

"'No way.' An Americanism I admire. It brooks no argument. I'm not convinced either way, but then I'm the one who must plead his case." He shuffled papers. "The groundskeeper, Miles, is promising. Were you aware that Garrett made arrangements to grant him permanent leasing rights to farm the property following Garrett's death?"

"No. Do you think he became impatient, and that Chub was the intended victim?"

"It's a splendid motive. Breaking one's back for oneself is generally preferable to breaking it for another. Two witnesses overheard Miles tell Garrett he brought the potatoes the cook served that evening."

"Make it three."

Fain wrote on the sheet before him. "He'd have had ample opportunity to inject those spuds with poison. The only thing against it is how he thought only Garrett would be affected."

"Maybe he was too obsessed to care how many died with him." But Valentino had already identified the flaw in the theory.

"No one else got sick," said the barrister, nailing it also. "He left before the meal was served, so even if he mixed up Melanie's and Garrett's plates, he had no chance to contaminate either one. Everyone I've spoken to who was at that meal sampled every dish."

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"I did as well, although I didn't eat much of any. It was a distressing affair. What about the cook?"

"I interviewed her this morning. Of course she denied it, but she confirmed that she was appalled by the way Melanie behaved toward her little girl. The woman took quite as much time calming her down as helping her clean up. As a motive for murder, however, I doubt it's strong enough to take the jury's mind off Garrett's. Money and property are formidable, and the mutual animosity between grandfather and granddaughter had a lengthy history."

"That leaves only Speedwell, but he's no suspect. No client, no fee."

"Exactly. Of course, the victim herself has provided us with a first-cabin way out of this, if I can but convince Garrett to go along."

Valentino watched him moving his papers about his desk, like a magician testing his props. He was as suspicious of the barrister as he was of conjurors in general.

"Diminished capacity," Fain said. "She half laid the case for us with that complaint she filed. An old man not in full possession of his faculties cannot be held accountable for his actions. He'd never even stand trial."

"Incompetence? The court would put him in a nursing home. That's just what he was desperate to avoid."

"He said something on that order when I suggested it, although his language was more forceful." Fain shrugged and gathered his sheets into a tidy stack. A blob of ink from his fountain pen stained his left cuff. "Nothing for it, then, but to plead him not guilty, with no reasonable scenario to offer in place of the Queen's. In which case, our beloved Chub will expire in prison. Naturally, as his attorney of record I'll see you take possession of those films he sold you straight away." He raised his thatchlike brows. "Mr. Valentino?"

Hearing his name jarred him from his contemplation of the spot on the man's sleeve. "No hurry. I canceled my flight to the States. I may have a scenario to offer. I know a thing or two about those."

Near evening, Fain and Valentino greeted Chub Garrett in a room at the police station reserved for attorney-client conferences. The surroundings, although spare, were more comfortable than those Valentino had seen back home. The walls were painted a restful green and the chairs around the yellow-oak table were upholstered. The prisoner, still wearing the clothes in which he'd been arrested, appeared oblivious to such details. His eyes were sunken in their sockets and his skull seemed to have shriveled away from his features, which hung in gray folds. He sat with his hands palm-downward on the arms of his chair as if he expected a lethal

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electric current to flow through him at any time.

"You Yanks lead the world in everything but social science," Fain told Valentino cheerfully. "Dr. Mooney may appear less compassionate at first glance than the child psychologists you employ, but she gets to the heart of the matter without all the soft music and scented candles. Are you up to this, old fellow?"

"Just say it," Chub snapped. "If you'd asked me to sic the system on poor little Laurette, I'd have turned you down flat; but knowing the woman he married, I'm not surprised her father's weak enough to fold right away."

Valentino said, "He's a good man. I spent a few minutes with him while Laurette was in session in another room. He knows his daughter hadn't much chance at a normal childhood and seems determined to do what's best for her from now on, without her mother's ambitious influence."

The barrister dumped a pile of papers from his briefcase and arranged them. "It was all open and aboveboard. Speedwell was present. He's a good solicitor, whatever else you may think of him. He's withdrawn his late client's petition, by the way, at the widower's request. You have Valentino to thank for the inspiration that led to the interview. That, and my carelessness with my linen." Ruefully he displayed the inkstain on his cuff.

The film archivist read only betrayal in Chub's tired gaze. "She was the only other person with motive," he said quickly, "and the only one small enough to crawl through that tiny window in the smokehouse. She's only six, and can't be expected to understand the consequences of her actions, the finality of death. All she wanted was to stop her mother from making her sad. That's what she told the psychologist in private: 'I feel sad all the time when she's there.' Present tense."

Fain said, "She tore her dress and soiled her stockings climbing into that smokehouse. She knew what a skull-and-bones means on a label; every child with a proper British upbringing is well schooled on that. She found her opportunity to sneak the strychnine into her mother's corned beef when she passed her the platter. The chemists found traces of it in the leftovers. Laurette told Dr. Mooney the rest."

"I'd have gone to prison to spare her that," Chub said. "I'd have given up everything I own and died in a nursing home."

"Her father will see she gets the counseling she needs," said Valentino.

"He'd better have a firmer hand than he took with her mother."

Fain said, "A less firm hand is just the thing for her, don't you think?"

Valentino broke the silence that followed. "I won't hold you to your agreement with UCLA. I'll cover the part of the fee Fain's earned out of my own pocket. In time, Laurette may learn to put

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what's happened behind her. She has an excellent chance at a happy childhood and a normal life."

Chub worked his hands on the arms of his chair. The eyes in the slack face resembled those of the carefree leader of the Pint-Size Pirates. "Maybe I should've killed my parents when I had the chance."

Valentino returned to California and lost himself in the myriad mundane details of locating and preserving popular entertainment canned on celluloid. He resigned himself to the proposition that life was too depressing for the Hollywood Dream Factory to make inroads against it for more than an hour or two. For the first time in his career, he wondered if he hadn't dedicated his life to a facetious lie. Progress reports from Weylin Fain about little Laurette's progress in an ordinary school, with ordinary friends and the appearance of happiness in class and at recess, buoyed his spirits temporarily, but he kept returning to that sad old man and his empty victory brought about through circumstances diametrically opposed to the upbeat mood of his vehicles. Carefree comedy had lost its appeal.

Months passed with him in this frame of mind, and many attempts at other acquisitions had succeeded and failed, before Valentino allowed himself to spend any time thinking about the Pint-Size Pirates. In the celebrities column of the *Los Angeles Times,* he read a brief announcement of the wedding of Chub Garrett and a woman named Gloria Campbell in Dublin's Christ's Church. The photo that accompanied it showed the round, happy face of the groom beside the equally rotund features of his bride, who retained the mischievous eyes and dimpled smile of Glory, the puppy-love interest of Chub Garrett, Sassafrass, Shadow, and Moon Pie, and even the surly Mugs. The text explained that the couple had reunited when Gloria read of Chub's travails in a newspaper in Sydney, Australia—where she'd lived for twenty years since the death of her second husband—and flew to Ireland to lend moral support.

A few days later, a huge carton arrived at the office of the UCLA Film Preservation Department, addressed to Valentino and plastered all over with certificates from Irish and U.S. customs. He spent the day watching reel after reel of the anarchical antics of a gang of Depression-era schoolchildren, blissfully unaware of what lay ahead when the kliegs were switched off for the last time and walls stayed put, and laughed himself to tears. ●

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

THE BATHTUB ORACLE

by Caroline Menzies

New fiction writer Caroline Menzies tells *EQMM* that her story "was inspired by an old claw-footed bathtub I had once, in which I occasionally heard music, presumably drifting up the pipes from some neighboring house. I thought it would make the perfect vehicle for something important to be communicated." Ms. Menzies hails from Owen Sound, in Ontario, Canada.

Maggie Deal was humming a tune when she first heard music coming from the bathtub. For a second she thought it was an echo, but then realized that the bathtub was playing classical music, Bach, perhaps, while she was humming a Queen song she'd heard in a store earlier that day. She knew it was a Queen song only because her son, Paul, had made a federal case out of her humming rock music. Maggie had no use for titles or other details. It was better if she didn't know them in the first place or she might be expected to remember them, and her brain was already full. Paul held the opposite view. With him, everything was worth remembering. Then it had to be categorized, labeled, pinned down, and put in its place. Even music. There must be no loose ends. Maggie often felt like she was a loose end.

Paul and his family—Simone and the two children, Austin and Stephanie—lived in Maggie's house, but you wouldn't know it was hers anymore. They inhabited the main area of the spacious four bedroom rent-free, while she occupied the small granny flat addition at the back. Paul was renovating in lieu of paying rent. Eventually he would tear down the wall and turn the back apartment into a mudroom, a laundry room, and a storage area. Eventually. That meant when Maggie died, and she intended to make him wait a very long time.

When he had picked her up outside the bank, after the last of her errands was done, he heard her humming the tune. He raised his eyebrows and scrutinized her from over the top of his glasses.

"Mom, I didn't know you liked rock music."

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"Who says I do?" she snapped back. He had a habit of making her feel like she was either ten years old, or the seventy-five years she was . . . someone who hadn't yet assembled all her marbles, or someone who had a full bag once but was now losing them.

"Well you're singing glam rock from nineteen eighty-six."

"I am not . . . whatever that is."

"Yes, you are. It's Queen's 'Who Wants to Live Forever?'"

"Which Queen?"

"That's the name of the band, 'Queen.' But they're not around anymore. The lead singer, Freddy Mercury, died of AIDS. You do remember what that is, don't you?"

"Of course I do. You get it from African mosquitoes. I'm not stupid!"

He sighed loudly. "No you don't. It's from body fluids. And I didn't say you were stupid, just forgetful sometimes. Oh, never mind. Anyway, Simone likes Queen. I'll ask her to loan you her CD if you'd like to listen to it."

"No thanks, you've already ruined it for me."

For the first few seconds after she realized the bathtub was playing its own tune, the hairs on her arms started to quiver as goose bumps rose beneath them. She was standing naked, about to climb into the tub. Her first instinct was to grab a towel and cover herself, as if she was being watched. She wasn't sure at first where it was coming from, so she walked around putting her ear to every surface until she concluded that the bathtub was definitely the source. She touched the water with one fingertip, half expecting to get electrocuted. Then, Paul would find her. Eventually. She shuddered at the thought of him seeing her dead-naked and hoped it would be someone else. A paramedic, perhaps. Certainly not Simone, Miss High and Mighty, with the half-starved body of a model, who glanced sideways at Maggie's plate whenever they dined together. She obviously thought Maggie didn't notice those sneaky looks of disdain. Celery sticks and small portions of dry meat filled one quarter of Simone's plate, while Maggie ate normal food, like potatoes, meat, and gravy. Simone even had the nerve to bring her own food in a little glass bowl the last time Maggie had them over for dinner.

"This isn't potluck," she'd said.

"Simone's got allergies," Paul replied, as if his skinny wife couldn't talk for herself.

"Oh, and just when did she get *them*? She ate my food last time."

"I was just diagnosed last week," Simone answered, then quickly changed the topic of conversation to Austin's soccer game.

No, Maggie wouldn't have *her* discovering her dead-naked body. That would be the final indignity. She wondered for a minute if she should start bathing in her swimsuit—the one she'd bought when she won the free cruise to Jamaica fifteen years ago. It was still in perfect condition, since she'd only worn it once on the cruise. Then

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no one would find her dead-naked in the tub.

She dipped in her entire hand and still didn't get electrocuted. Instead, it seemed to surge with some kind of strange energy, though that could have been the liniment on her wrist reacting with the warm water. Still, she was fascinated and turned the taps off. The music was even stronger then and sounded ghostly, not the type of thing one heard every day, unless you were in the presence of pimply teenagers with their Discomen or whatever other gadgets they had for blasting music onto their eardrums. What she was hearing now kind of resembled the tinny sound you could hear leaking out of their ears if you accidentally got too close to one of them. But there weren't any teenagers lurking nearby. Or even close neighbors, since the house was detached. Maggie wondered if it was otherworldly. Whether someone on the other side, wherever that might be, was trying to contact her. This thought both excited and scared her. She dropped in her bath salts and climbed in, pretty sure now that if her hand couldn't get electrocuted, then probably the rest of her body wouldn't. The warmth was soothing, as always, and she settled back and listened to the first of many Saturday-night bathtub concerts, all the while waiting for an actual message from the spirit world.

Paul was almost finished renovating the main part of the house. He had completely gutted the kitchen. Where once there had been a pantry, he'd put in an oversized fridge with an icemaker on the door. His scotch would never go unchilled again. He'd replaced the single white porcelain sink with a double brushed stainless-steel affair and moved it to the newly installed island in the middle of the kitchen, complete with a granite countertop. Maggie thought a sink in the middle of a kitchen was a strange notion, but Paul defended it by saying it was much more convenient for food preparation. When they would actually start "preparing" food was anyone's guess.

He had also redone the main bathroom and put in a second bathroom downstairs. They had glass sinks that Maggie thought looked like birdbaths, and upstairs the bathtub was full of strange holes that quite worried her. She thought the children might get toes or fingers stuck in them, but Paul insisted it was safe.

"That's a Jacuzzi, Mom. You need one of those for your arthritis." He was itching to get his hands on Maggie's bathtub. Not because he liked it. He wanted to take it to the junkyard and that upset Maggie a great deal.

It was one of those old claw-foot affairs, painted green on the outside, though it was chipped and worn. One of the legs had been broken after a flying sink hit it. The plumber responsible promised to fix it, but he had merely amputated it and put a big iron bar in its place. Maggie was furious, but still wasn't willing to part with it. She loved its shape—the way it conformed to her body. It was deep and long and now it played music.

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"Mom, what is it with you and this bathtub? One of these days, you'll slip and hurt yourself getting in and out of that thing. Some of the modern versions are just as room but much safer. They have an overflow drain so there's no danger of flooding. And I still say you'd learn to love a Jacuzzi."

"I love my bathtub, and now it plays music to me every Saturday night."

"Music? What are you talking about?"

"Nothing," she said.

"Forgetting our pills again, are we?" he said.

She scowled at him and fell silent, wishing she'd never even mentioned the music to him. He didn't believe in anything that required an open mind, the way she did. She wondered how he'd gotten to be that way. She had always been intensely superstitious. Her mother had been like that and so had her grandmother. When Maggie played bingo, which she did every Friday afternoon, she took five talismans to attract luck. One was a rabbit's foot she'd had for fifty years that was withered and almost hairless. There was also a porcelain poodle—the last thing Charles, her late husband, had given to her. She also had one of her first grandchild's socks, and a picture of a castle in Scotland that supposedly housed the ghost of Mary, Queen of Scots. She had been told once by a fortuneteller that she was Mary reincarnated, so she considered it to be a picture of her ancestral home. The last and most recent addition to her collection was a sealed bottle that she'd bought from a street vendor in Toronto. It was full of air and one single grain of rice that was mounted on a raised piece of molded plastic. There was Chinese calligraphy etched on the rice that you needed a microscope to read. When the vendor saw her he said, "Wait, wait," and selected one particular bottle from the many dozens that were on his display. "This one. This one for you. Special. Just you. It say 'bad luck.' You keep it sealed up and no more bad luck come to you."

She lined them all up around her bingo cards and whenever she was one number away from a win, she touched the sought-after number with one of her lucky charms. The next time she used a different charm. This was her system, rotating them all consecutively before beginning again with the first. Everyone there had a system of some kind to encourage luck. Some people got up and turned around three times between games. Others had leprechauns or angels sitting around the edge of their cards. Some players crossed themselves and held little statues of the Virgin Mary, praying to her to give them a miracle. If someone did happen to win, whatever he or she had worn or eaten for snacks on that lucky night had to be duplicated week after week, and obsessions were born. Everyone who was considered a regular sat in the exact same place each week. If someone new came and inadvertently took someone's chair, they were politely asked by the management

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to move to the drafty section of the hall with the wobbly chairs that no one else would sit on. When one of the regulars died, the rush to claim the newly opened spot caused a few nasty incidents.

At bingo, nothing was considered unusual behavior, but Paul and Simone would have thought it all to be extremely strange. They made fun of such things. When Maggie bought the grain of rice for twenty dollars, Paul said, "Mother, tell me you didn't really spend twenty dollars on that?"

When she replied, "Well, actually, yes I did," he stared at her with his mouth open and his bushy eyebrows forced up against his hairline, freezing his face in an exaggerated attempt to look shocked.

"That's just a big scam," he scoffed.

Simone was nodding her thin, pointed face in agreement, as she often did when Paul was criticizing his mother. This only encouraged him. "How do you know it actually says what he told you it says? It might say 'Stupid Old Woman,' or 'Fetch Fido his Food.'" They both laughed while Maggie bristled and bottled up her anger like the grain of rice.

The music had been playing for six consecutive weeks and Maggie still hadn't received a message from beyond. She was having a particularly trying time with Paul, whose obsessive need to update everything made him relentless in his quest to get her to give up her less-than-perfect tub. The battle was exhausting her, and as she lay in the warm water listening to the last few strains of Handel's *Messiah,* she decided if this might be the last time she heard the music, she should at least acknowledge it. So she cleared her throat and then said rather loudly, "Well, thank you. I don't know how much longer I can keep Paul's hands off you."

The music abruptly stopped and a watery voice replied, "You're welcome. Paul who?"

Maggie almost had a stroke. She had never thought to speak to it before, but now that she had, she was more certain than ever that it was coming from the other side, wherever that was, and her tub was merely a conduit. She'd read about such things and at first was worried that if she answered she could be opening up the portal even wider and allowing in bad spirits. Then she reasoned that for six weeks she'd had nothing but good feelings from it, so it had to be an angelic spirit.

When she recovered her composure, she stuttered, "Er . . . Paul is my son. Don't you know that? He's planning to get rid of you."

Silence ensued for a long minute, during which she didn't know if she should get the bejesus out of there or say something else. While she was still deciding, the voice came back.

"Well, maybe you should report this."

"Me? Not to be rude . . . but isn't that your job? Can't you do something from over there?"

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"... Who is this? What's your name?"

"Maggie Deal."

"So Paul Deal is your son? I know him. What's he saying about me?"

"Yes, Paul. He doesn't like loose ends. You're in the way of progress. Just like me. I'll be next, you know. His wife is not very nice either. She's in on everything he does."

"I see. And how is he planning to do this?"

"Crush you with one of those big machines, I expect."

"Ouch! Well, my, my. Thank you for telling me, Maggie. Are you in any immediate danger?"

"No, I don't think so. As long as I don't get electrocuted."

"Oh, rest assured, I'll make sure that doesn't happen. In the meantime, is there anything I can do for you? Anything at all?"

"Well, maybe you could help my arthritis. And I have this strange-looking mole . . ."

"Oh. Take these pills called Banish. They're herbal, but you can get them at the drugstore. Work like a charm. And have your doctor check the mole. Today if you can. I wouldn't mess around with it. Never know with these things."

"Thank you." Maggie beamed, thrilled to have a direct line to a benevolent spirit who could not only help her with her problems with Paul, but also give her health advice.

It made her even more determined to hang on to the tub. She would never let Paul get his interfering paws on it. If he did, it would be over her dead body, naked or otherwise.

Maggie wasn't aware of the two police officers knocking on the front door, even though there were two more sitting in a second squad car just up the street, and another two sitting in a third. Her windows looked onto the backyard, where the willow tree that Sunday morning swayed gracefully in the balmy May breeze, giving no indication that anything was amiss. The side window of Maggie's apartment only allowed a limited view of the side of the house next-door, which was basically just a brick wall. She wasn't aware of Paul, still in his track pants and sweat-soaked T-shirt after his morning run, being handcuffed and taken to the police station. Or of Simone being picked up on her way home from one of the Sunday-morning play dates that she organized religiously for the children. Nor was she aware that the children had been placed temporarily in foster care while their parents were booked and processed on two charges of conspiracy to commit murder. But that's exactly what happened.

The other thing Maggie didn't know was exactly what her son did for a living. But John Franklin Hewitt did.

John Franklin Hewitt was a retired architect who served in a volunteer capacity on two separate boards. The one that was nearest and dearest to his heart was the Heritage Property

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Foundation board, an organization he had founded and which dedicated its resources to the designation and preservation of heritage properties, The other was a royal pain in the ass, but necessary. It was the City Planning Committee, and though it involved a lot of bickering or "persuasive negotiating," as some liked to call it, at least it kept him informed of any upcoming developments and allowed him some leverage in taking steps to protect any heritage properties that were at risk of being demolished.

The current dispute involved a local dance hall. The Imp, or Imperial Ballroom, hadn't been an actual dance hall for many years, but in its heyday, it was the place to go on Saturday nights, and people still referred to the building as The Imp. John had met his late wife, Hilde, there and they had even held their wedding reception in the hall. It had seen a few incarnations over the years, but now its roof was caving in and it had been declared unsafe. This infuriated John because with the city's endorsement they could. access a heritage grant from the federal government and fix it. The problem was, it sat on a valuable piece of real estate in a very picturesque part of town, overlooking the river. It had been bequeathed for fifty years to the city to use as it pleased, with the one stipulation that no major changes would be made, other than those necessary for its upkeep. The city had fallen short on the upkeep part of the deal, and now the leasehold period had expired and several groups were vying for control of the property.

One was a group of local fishermen, who liked to fish on that particular curve in the river and didn't want any demolition or construction to jeopardize their access. The most powerful group wanted it torn down and a condo complex built on the site, and had offered the city a hefty sum for the land. The city wanted the condo or, more specifically, the income from the sale of the land, and the additional property taxes it would generate. They also couldn't get liability insurance any more, so were anxious to unload it. The neighbors wanted it preserved, and John's group had offered to take on the responsibility provided the city would endorse their grant application. But they were stalling, thanks to the powerful lobby group working for the condo developer.

Heading this group was one Paul Deal.

Everyone in town knew about the battle for the Imp. And that included the entire police department. After some of the public debates that had ended in near riots, it wasn't a big stretch of anyone's imagination to believe that some of the participants on either side were capable of hatching murder plots.

At the station, Paul and Simone were separated. Their Miranda rights had been read and Paul put in a call to his lawyer, who was not answering his phone that Sunday due to a ferocious hangover he'd spent the better part of Saturday night earning. When Paul

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was charged with conspiracy to murder John Franklin Hewitt and another unknown individual on the hearsay of an unidentified witness, he was livid, but without legal representation, he couldn't convince anyone that he should be released on his own recognizance. That had to be determined by a judge, and he would have to wait until the next morning for that to happen. The arresting officer, coincidentally, was an avid fisherman. He convinced the duty sergeant that Paul should be held over until the unidentified witness and second potential victim could be located and placed in protective custody. In the meantime, Paul was incarcerated in a small, smelly cell with a metal slab for a bed and a wailing drunk (who was, unfortunately, not Paul's lawyer) for a neighbor.

Simone was held as a co-conspirator in an almost identical version of his cell in the women's section of the jail, except without anyone occupying the neighboring cells. She had no idea what was going on, and Paul wasn't in a position to tell her, even if he had known. She was dealing with a fierce migraine and an unsympathetic guard, who wouldn't kill the lights. Nor would she give her earplugs to shut out the awful clanging echoes that were reverberating off the steel and concrete structure with alarming frequency, despite the lack of prisoners. There was also a strong smell of disinfectant laced with something else foul that made her gag.

The house was strangely silent that night. Maggie assumed that Paul and Simone and the kids had gone out for dinner. Paul usually told Maggie when they would be out for any length of time, but he was likely still mad at her after their last bathtub argument. When the silence continued well into the next morning, she was becoming quite alarmed. On a Monday morning there should be some signs of activity filtering through the walls. She heard nothing. She didn't like Paul, but depended on him for certain things, and he was her son. Hopefully, nothing terrible had happened. She wasn't sure what to do. There wasn't even anyone she could call. Paul was her only real link to the outside world. She had known all of her neighbors once, but a new crop had since moved in. Young families with small children. Nice people, but too busy to bother with some old woman worrying that her son and his family weren't home.

She decided to consult what she had come to think of as her "Bathtub Oracle." She wasn't sure if this was a good idea—breaking the pattern. She bathed on Saturday nights and this was a Monday. But she was desperate, and ran some water to see if the music started up. When it didn't, she shouted into the tub.

"Hello, are you there? Hello. HELLO!" After a few minutes of shouting she heard the garbled but familiar voice of her spirit friend.

"Maggie, is that you?" It said.

"Yes, Oracle. Thank heavens! I'm so worried. Paul and Simone and the children . . . they've all disappeared."

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"Maggie. Thank God you're all right. Where in the blazes is your apartment?"

"It's at the back of the house where Paul lives."

"I'm coming over. Stay put."

"You're what . . . ?"

Maggie was surprised when she opened the door and found an ordinary person standing there. A man about her age, but who seemed quite fit. He still had all of his hair, though it was completely white. It framed a pleasant face that conveyed a look of pure relief at seeing Maggie Deal alive and well.

When the dust settled, and Maggie heard how Paul and Simone had been arrested, she was shocked, but also amused at the thought of her controlling son and his uptight snooty wife in jail. Over tea and chocolate cake with her nice neighbor, Mr. Hewitt, Maggie heard the whole story about the ancient plumbing in his house, how he had recently installed speakers in his bathroom, his penchant for classical music and for old buildings, and the whole business about The Imp. Maggie remembered it well. She had danced to Benny Goodman music there with Charles, back in the day when things still seemed to make sense. Benny Goodman was "The King of Swing," and not some hapless rock-'n'-roller who called himself a "Queen." She was very disappointed that Paul was giving this nice man and his group such a hard time.

She, in turn, told him about her tub and he laughed when she told him about the Oracle, and then she said she felt like an old fool, but he assured her that she was no fool, just lonely.

Then he told her that if she accompanied him to the police station she could help straighten out the whole matter and Paul and Simone would be released.

Maggie thought about that for a minute, then said with a chuckle, "Let's finish our tea and cake first, shall we? They can darn well wait. Paul needs to be taught a lesson. When he comes out, I'll have a word with him about a few things, like your building, and my bathtub. I'm still his mother after all, dammit. If he doesn't listen to me this time, why I'll have him arrested again."

Tea and cake finished, Maggie escorted Mr. Hewitt to the bathroom to show him the bathtub. After some mutual admiration for all things old and well built, Mr. Hewitt escorted Maggie to the police station. Following a short explanation, which prompted a riotous exchange of laughter that brought tears to the eyes of the officer in charge, all charges were dropped and Paul and Simone were released. Mr. Hewitt drove Maggie home. Paul and Simone wouldn't accept Hewitt's offer of a ride and took a cab.

To Maggie's delight, the topic of the tub was never raised in the days following Paul's release. But her delight was short-lived. Within a

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week, Paul had some haulers come in and remove Maggie's tub while she was at the hairdresser's. The delivery truck carrying the new bathtub arrived just as the haulers were pulling away with the old one, destined for the scrap yard. The plumber, an old drinking buddy of Paul's, was already waiting in Maggie's kitchen, sipping on a warm scotch. Paul had apologized for not having ice because his fridge's icemaker was on the blink. With the job completed, they had another scotch and then the plumber left. Paul took a satisfied backward glance at the new tub. He was glad he'd decided on the cheaper model. To hell with her Jacuzzi. This was smaller than her old one since, he reasoned, she was old and shrinking, and likely wouldn't be using it all that long anyway . . . at least, that was the hope.

Things had been a bit strained, even without the tension of the tub arguments. Earlier in the week, Maggie had tried talking to Paul about his involvement with the Imp, but he said he didn't want to get into it with her, that things were out of his hands. Now, on the way back home from the hairdresser's, she thought he seemed more cheerful than usual. Maybe the iciness between them was thawing. Then he announced that he had a little surprise for Maggie when she got back home, and without even looking at him, she knew.

The next day, when Simone answered a knock at the front door and saw Maggie standing on the doorstep, it was not completely unexpected. They hadn't heard a word from her since she'd learned the fate of her old tub. Simone braced herself for the worst, pasted on her requisite hollow smile, then said, "Oh. Maggie! Er, how nice. You don't usually come around to the front door."

Maggie was on a mission and couldn't be bothered with useless chitchat. "Is Paul in?" she asked, stepping over the threshold without waiting for an invitation.

Simone's steely demeanor weakened and her voice took on a whiny tone. "I hope you're not here to row with him. I have such a headache. Had it all week. He really only wanted to do what was best for you."

"Row? Not at all, Simone. Is he here? I see his car in the driveway. I have something for him." She gestured to a small gift-wrapped package she was carrying.

Simone's face softened slightly. "Oh. That is a surprise. Why, it's even sweet. Just a minute, I'll get him. He's been fooling with the fridge. Almost electrocuted himself. He's good at wheeling and dealing, you know, but not so good with things electrical."

"Yes, I know," Maggie said stonily. "He never picked up any of his father's better skills, it seems."

Simone returned with Paul, who cast a cautious eye in Maggie's direction. "Mother, nice to see you. Simone told me something about a gift. Is that true? You realize that I was right then in getting rid of that old monstrosity of a tub? I wasn't sure how you'd feel about it. You didn't say anything yesterday, but you looked a bit upset, as I kind of suspected you would be. But I was hoping after you'd slept on

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it—not the tub of course, just the idea, ha, ha—you'd agree that it was a good thing." He emitted a high-pitched strain of nervous laughter.

Maggie let him squirm for a few seconds, then said, "That's exactly what happened, Paul. Here. Open your present. It's not much, but it means a lot to me. And it's what you deserve, I realize, for everything you've done for me."

Paul felt there was something funny about the way she said "done for me" but then he thought he was perhaps just imagining it. He took the package and unwrapped it, dropping the colorful paper on the floor where he stood. He eyed the object with a look of puzzlement.

"Why mother, it's your grain of rice. Isn't this one of your bingo luck things? Does this mean you're giving up on all that business after the bathtub nonsense?"

"Oh I'm not giving up on it. No. I just thought you should have some of it. Now that it's yours, it should start to work its magic for you."

"You know I don't really believe in that stuff, don't you? But, hey, it's a nice thought. Isn't that a nice thought, Simone?"

"Yes, lovely," said Simone in a monotone. "I suppose we could find some appropriate place to put it."

Paul placed the small glass container with the tiny grain of rice sealed inside it on the small hallway table.

"Well, Mother, that's very thoughtful of you and I'd like to invite you in for some tea and crackers, but I've got a golf appointment with some city councilors and I really gotta get a move on. And I think Simone probably has a headache."

"Oh, no problem, son. I've got to get back to my place anyway. Got something in the oven. My friend John is coming for dinner. Here, you've dropped the paper. I like to recycle it, you know." She stooped and carefully picked up the pieces, smoothing them carefully between her fingers. As she rose, her elbow bumped against the hall table, knocking the glass container to the limestone floor, where it shattered, sending the tiny, inscripted rice grain bouncing towards Paul's feet.

"Oh my," she said, "How clumsy of me. I'm so sorry, Paul. I do hope you'll forgive me."

He shrugged. "Hey, it's no big deal. Don't worry. It's the thought that counts. Simone'll clean it up, won't you dear?"

"Oh yes, it will be my pleasure."

"Well, it's a big deal to me, Paul, and I do worry. But I guess it's like you said . . . it's the thought that counts."

"That's the spirit, Mother. I tried to do something right for you and you've done something you felt was right for me."

"Yes, Paul. That is the spirit." As she turned towards the door she said without a backward glance, "Goodbye, Paul. Goodbye, Simone."

Paul caught a glimpse of her reflection as she moved past the hall mirror. For just a second, he thought he saw a brief flicker of a smile flash across his mother's face, but it could have been just the light playing tricks.●

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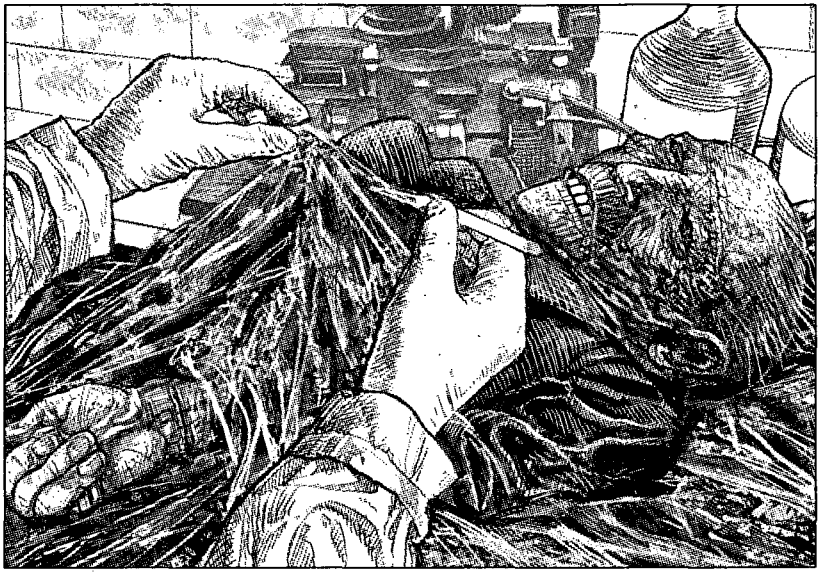

Art by Allen Davis

THE MUMMY

by Peter Turnbull

WEDNESDAY

The body was found in the shrubs, next to the towpath, beside the York to Hull canal, out in the country, beyond the suburbs where the landscape is flat, and that year, courtesy of a rainy summer, the foliage was lush, lush enough to partially conceal a human corpse. The body in question was wrapped in a heavy-duty plastic sheeting like a rolled-up carpet and had been laid by the canal side, in long grass. It was found by a jogger. He had noticed it rather than found it. It had first caught his eye on the Saturday as he ran past. It was still there on the Sunday, when families walked the towpath. It was there on the Monday and still there on the Tuesday morning. But on the Tuesday evening the man, the jogger, found his thoughts turning on the length of rubber sheeting. It nagged him with a growing realisation that the item in question was just the right length and width to be the grossest form of fly-tipping. The realisation stayed with him, hovering in his mind like an annoying fly which by its noise took up a disproportionate amount of space. So that on the Wednesday he set out on his nor-

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mal morning run taking with him a pair of gloves and ran until he reached the spot where the roll of plastic lay, slowed to a walk, and finally stood over it, and waited until another jogger going in the opposite direction had passed by. It had not been moved or disturbed in any way since he had first seen it: It was clearly his fate to find out if it contained what he feared it contained. The plastic was old, stiff, fragile to the touch. He took the edge of the roll and peeled it back

He saw a hand. Human. Male, he thought.

He replaced the plastic, slowly, reverentially, and carried on jogging. There was a phone box on his route, and it was the closest phone to that stretch of the canal that he knew. He ran at a steady pace, until he reached the phone box. The box was occupied by a middle-aged lady, chatting excitedly, and the jogger sat on a dry stone wall until the occupant had finished talking, whereupon she replaced the phone and exited the box, holding the door open for him, saying she was sorry and hoped his call wasn't urgent.

"No urgency at all," replied the jogger. "No urgency at all."

But he made it a three nines call nonetheless.

Fans of Peter Turnbull's York police series starring DI Hennessey and Sergeant Yellich will be glad to know that they've got not only this new story to add to the series but a novel-length case out from Severn House. *Booklist* says of the book, entitled *Chelsea Smile* (May '07): "A solid British police procedural with a plot full of unexpected twists and a pair of protagonists who can play in the same league as any of Britain's top cop duos."

The towpath was cordoned off with blue-and-white tape, white-shirted constables politely but firmly turned back the joggers, the strolling, the anglers, and the just plain curious. The plastic, once unravelled, revealed the body of a small, finely made middle-aged man, the sort of man who in life would attract nicknames such as Shorty or Half-pint. He was dressed in a heavy winter jacket, heavy woollen trousers, and winter shoes. Yet he looked as though he had died only recently.

Detective Inspector Hennessey stood over the body, pondering it with a police officer's eye for detail. Doctor Louise D'Acre knelt by the body, pondering it with a pathologist's eye, but also searching for detail. Detail of a different sort. Hennessey sought details to answer his question "Who?" Dr. D'Acre sought details to answer her questions "Why?" and "What cause?"

"It's the first time I've ever seen it." Dr. D'Acre stood. She was a slender woman in her late forties, short cropped hair, just a trace of lipstick, a woman who was growing old gracefully. She turned to

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Hennessey. Their eyes met, briefly, knowingly, then she turned her head away.

"It?" There was a note of warmth in his voice.

"Mummification." D'Acre looked down at the body. "I've read about it, of course. I'm familiar with it, theoretically speaking, but I've never come across it. . . ."

"In the flesh?"

"I was trying to avoid using that phrase. But yes, this is the first time I have met mummification. But now I can cross it off my 'things to do' list. Explaining the warm clothing . . . the height of summer. He could have been dead for years."

"Years?"

"Mummification. No decomposition of the flesh or the features, but inside he'll be hollow. He'll be very light to carry. It means that immediately upon death he was placed in an airtight place. No insects to eat up the lovely juicy flesh. The flesh itself became as parchment and as such was of little interest to present-day—this time, this day—insects. But decomposition is beginning, a much slower rate than if he was fresh, but the sooner we get him to York City, the better."

"So he was placed in an airtight room . . ."

"Or container."

"Or container, possibly for years, and then for some reason removed a few days ago and left in a very exposed place. Why?"

"Well that, Inspector, is definitely your department. I, for my part, have to address the question of how? How did he meet his end, before his time?"

"Amstrad" was a Persian. His true given name was obscure even in his native land, which he claimed was and always would be Persia—he having left before, and distancing himself from, the Ayatollah's rule. In the United Kingdom, the closest his British colleagues came to the accurate pronunciation of his name was that of a Japanese electronics company. So Amstrad he was, though he occasionally remarked that no one, not even his darling English rose of a wife, could pronounce his name like his dear mother had once pronounced it; but he bore the mispronunciation with patience, tolerance, and good humour. He was a diligent man and was so on the day he carefully extracted the garments from their sealed cellophane wrapper, and laid them one by one, side by side, on the surface of the bench, his bench, in Her Majesty's Forensic Science Laboratory, Wetherby, West Yorkshire. There were undergarments, of the thermal variety, so-called "long johns," two pairs of socks, a pair of heavy walking shoes, thick woollen trousers, a thick shirt, a pullover, a heavy jacket, fleece lined, all of the size that would fit a small man, or a growing boy. Amstrad Baft was a small man too, but larger than had been the owner of these garments.

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Bespectacled and white-coated, he began a minute square-inch by square-inch survey, trawling for clues, anything, anything at all which would indicate the recent history of the clothing, or perhaps the cause of death of the wearer.

Finding nothing of note from the normal-vision examination, he made a search of the pockets. All were empty, except the right-hand pocket of the jacket. It contained a till receipt from the Co-op supermarket in the centre of York, timed at 18:06 hours on the 15th day of January—eight years earlier. A man would not keep a till receipt in his jacket pocket for eight years, but it would, reasoned Amstrad Baft, be the sort of thing that wouldn't be noticed if someone else was rifling through the pockets. He placed the receipt in a cellophane sachet and then began to examine the fibres of the clothes under the electron microscope.

THURSDAY

On the Thursday morning, Chief Inspector Hennessey took two telephone calls which were relevant to the inquiry into the death of "the mummy," as he had privately come to think of the man found by the canal. The first was from Dr. A. Baft of the Forensic Science Laboratory at Wetherby, who gave his first name as something which to Hennessey's ears sounded like "Amstrad," but he was unsure and so addressed the caller as "Dr. Baft," as indeed he would have done anyway. Dr. Baft informed him that the clothing was clean and of high quality, indicating a man of substance, though perhaps short of stature. The clothing seemed old, of earlier fashion, but had not deteriorated, and Dr. Baft advanced that it had been preserved in some way.

"Dr. D'Acre, the forensic pathologist, believes the corpse to have been mummified in some way." Hennessey glanced at the word "substance" on his notepad, circled it, and wrote "money motive?" beside it.

"That would explain the preserved clothing," Dr. Baft said. "I also came across a till receipt."

"Oh?"

"Yes, in the pocket of the jacket, just where a fella would put a receipt at eighteen-oh-six hours on the fifteenth of January eight years ago. He went to the Co-op in York and bought foodstuffs. He paid with a ten-pound note and got two pounds, fifty-three pence in change. He bought vegetables, some tinned stuff, four pints of milk, and a pizza, a frozen pizza . . . and a packet of tea bags."

"A bachelor?"

"You think so?"

"Living alone, anyway, one frozen pizza is a single person's purchase."

"I suppose it is, come to think of it. That's a police officer's brain working, I would never have thought of that."

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"If indeed the receipt is his, but who carries other folks' till receipts around in their pockets? It was probably the last purchase of his life. Four pints of milk, a large packet of tea bags, he was stocking up. He didn't expect to die."

"Again, a police officer's brain."

"Too long in the job, Dr. Baft."

And the two men smiled at each other down the phone. It was the first time they had spoken to each other, and a mutual liking grew rapidly.

"The year," Dr. Baft said "that was the year my daughter was born, she was born in May, but I remember taking my wife to antenatal clinics in dreadful weather. That was the year of that bad winter. I despaired of it going, I thought the next ice age had arrived, didn't let up until mid April."

"I remember, who could forget? My dog loved it, though. Like all dogs he suffers in the heat."

"There was nothing else in the pockets. No wallet, no loose change, no letters, no utility bill, nothing, as if someone had rifled his pockets, but hadn't found or hadn't bothered with the till receipt."

"Which, in the end, told us much."

"It appears. I've had a glance at the plastic sheeting, found nothing, but I'll give it a closer examination this P.M."

"Appreciated."

The second phone call in respect of "the mummy" came from Dr. Louise D'Acre.

"A single massive blow to the skull." Louise D'Acre spoke matter-of-factly. "No other injuries, no trace of poison. He once wore a wedding ring, but had taken it off. Its 'shadow' was on his ring finger."

"Ah . . ."

"Is that significant?"

"Answers a question. We found a till receipt in his pocket; the indication of the purchases was that he was a bachelor. It now seems he may be a divorcé. But a man who lived alone anyway."

"He was a man in his mid forties. Forty-four, -five, or -six. I took a tooth from the upper set of teeth, cut it in half. Gave me an age of forty-five, and that test asks that a margin of twelve months on either side be allowed."

Hennessey wrote "45 ± 12/12" on his pad. "He took good care of his teeth, British dentistry, so there'll be dental records to check once you have a possible name for him."

"Always useful to confirm on ID."

"Returning to the injury. It's a concentrated impact point, from which the skull fractures radiate outwards, like spokes from a hub. A hammer blow, or a brick . . . something like that. But not a long object, like a golf club, that would have caused a linear fracture."

Hennessey replaced the phone. He glanced out his office window

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at tourists walking the medieval walls beneath the vast blue sky. He glanced at the clock on the wall, above the police mutual calendar. Midday. Time for lunch. Like the citizens of York, Hennessey knew the quickest way to walk the city is to walk the walls, rather than the street-level pavements, and so he signed out and walked the wall from Micklegate Bar to Lendal Bridge, and thence to Lendal, and the fish restaurant.

The file on "the mummy" case grew. Hennessey now knew the man to have been murdered by being struck with a hammer, or similar object or instrument. He knew that in life the deceased had been wealthy, for he wore not the clothing of a poor man. He knew that the deceased probably lived alone, and most significantly he knew the deceased had been murdered shortly after six P.M. on the 15th day of January, eight years earlier. The man was clean-shaven and very short of stature. And his dentistry work was British. All added together, Hennessey knew it would be enough for the missing persons bureau to suggest a name. He picked up the phone on his desk, pressed a four-figure internal number, and when his call was answered he said, "Collator?"

"Yes, sir."

"Hennessey here."

"Sir."

Then Hennessey gave all the details he had on the deceased, adding, "not necessarily local."

"I see, sir." The collator was eager, anxious to please. "I'll come back asap," which the collator pronounced "aysap," to Hennessey's irritation, but the world was changing, he was closing down fast upon his retirement, and it was the small things which crept up on him from time to time, and reminded him he wasn't changing with the world. In his day, he would have returned "a.s.a.p." or "as soon as." But "aysap" . . . he sighed as he put the phone down. He cared not for "aysap," no matter how efficient was the youthful collator. He rose and went to the corner of his office and switched on the electric kettle and observed Micklegate Bar as he waited for the kettle to boil, the open-topped double-deckers, the people of the town hurrying, the tourists ambling. He returned to his desk carrying a mug of coffee.

The collator was efficient, so efficient that he returned "aysap" before Hennessey's mug of coffee had cooled sufficiently to allow it to be consumed. Tony Watch, the collator informed him, had been reported missing by his sister on the 16th of January eight years earlier. Physical description matched; he was wealthy because of an information technology company he had formed, and was recently separated at the time he went missing. His home address was out near Selby; his sister, the reportee, lived "on the other side of the planet," in Holgate. Hennessey thanked the collator and

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replaced the phone. He left his office and walked down the corridor to the office of the younger, life-all-ahead-of-him Sergeant Yellich, and tapped on the doorframe of his office doorway. "Grab your sun hat, Yellich, we're off to sunny Holgate."

"We are, sir?" Yellich stood.

"We are, sir."

Holgate is that part of the Faymous and Faire Citie of Yorke ye tourists never see. It is black-terraced houses in rows, beyond the railway line, where washing hangs from lines suspended across the street. Hennessey and Yellich went to St. Pancras' Wynd, to number 57, being the given address of Mrs. Torr, who eight years earlier had reported her brother to the police as a missing person.

"Never did like her." Mrs. Torr was a frail woman who looked older than her sixty-three years, as if stricken by an internal growth. "I grew up in these streets, so did Tony, well, he would—he was my little brother. Our dad worked on the railway in the steam days, you could smell the smoke from the railway station in these streets. I'd lay awake at night and listen to the chuff and clank of the steam trains. Now they whirr past on continuous rails with hardly a sound by comparison. Such a safe, solid sound the old steam trains used to make, I really miss the sound, but then I'm a lass, I never had to get up at three A.M. and fire one so it would be ready for eight A.M. That's how long it took to fire one from cold, and that was a small one."

"Your brother . . . ?" Hennessey saw the old lady's need to reminisce, especially because of her apparent medical conditions, but he had a job to do.

"Aye, Tony. He did well for himself. Those machines, I never understood them, but they came in so quickly. Ten years between me and Tony, just ten years, but I was too old for them, he was just right. Got himself out of Holgate all right. Me, I married a lad from the next street who worked on buses, and didn't get out. But Jack was a good man. I had two children and I've got six grandchildren. So I had my wealth in other ways. So Tony's body has been found, you say?"

"We think it is his body. The description fits. There's indications that fit with the time you reported him missing."

"I reported him murdered. Missing! I reported him murdered. But would they listen? I had to make a 'misper' report. That's what they called my little brother, a 'misper' report, not even a 'missing person,' but a 'misper.'"

"Why did you believe him to have been murdered, Mrs. Torr?"

"Well, that cow, that calculating cow he married of course. She was one scheming female. Still is. Still in that house, Tony's lovely old house he worked so hard to pay for, now she's got it. He's dead and she's got it. He took her off the streets, gave her a house. He was forty-four, she was twenty-five. I warned him. I could see her for what she was, a woman can see another woman for what she is,

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a man can't, not always, anyway. My waters told she was bad for Tony. But would he listen? He was in his forties, born premature, and was small, never a success with the girls. He was known as Pocket Watch at school, Tony Watch the Pocket Watch . . . but he became a computer geek and made a fortune . . . and then the blond bombshell who's young enough to be his daughter drops in his lap . . . he couldn't believe his luck. 'Worth waiting for' was his attitude. Then just six weeks, I mean six weeks into the marriage, he came round here, devastated. Heard her on the phone . . . talking to a girlfriend. . . . She said, 'I've only got to stick it for sixth months, then I get half the house.' What she was saying was that if she separates after six months, she'll get half the house as part of the divorce settlement. Tony would have to sell it, give her half the proceeds."

"It's not that simple."

"She didn't know that. But the point was, Tony knew why she had married him. If it was a marriage." Mrs. Torr looked at the summer-empty hearth and then the mantelpiece on which stood a framed photograph of a young couple, arms round each other. "Not like my marriage. I had a marriage. A proper marriage. But Tony was clever, wouldn't agree to a divorce, wouldn't give her grounds. By then she'd seen a lawyer, I think, and the lawyer told her it doesn't matter what her mates tell her, she wouldn't get her hands on half the property quite so easily. It was then that she moved out, left him. But they were still married. Tony got frightened then. Feared she would 'do something.'"

"Do something?"

"He feared for his life. Took to phoning me each day, then one day he became a 'misper,' except I knew my little brother was dead. After two years he was presumed dead, so she, as his wife, got everything. She didn't get half the house, she found a way of getting it all. Each Christmas she sends me a card with a smiley face on the inside."

Hennessey and Yellich both thought Mrs. Torr's description of her late brother's house as being "lovely, old" was apt. It was eighteenth century, graceful, balanced lines, the type of house which had given way to the Victorian Gothic style. It stood in landscaped grounds and was ivy-clad. A rabbit hopped across the lawn, doves cooed in a dovecote beside the house, a blackbird sang.

Mrs. Watch, when she was met, was a woman with cold eyes. Tall, slender, all in proportion, but moved like a woman with considerable physical strength. A rapid piece of mental arithmetic by both officers put her age at thirty-three. She did indeed look about that age, having reached that age with a life blessedly free of arthritis-inducing drudgery or figure-ruining multiple pregnancies. Her clothes were sombre in a tasteful and expensive sort of way, but by far the most striking feature of her appearance was her jewellery, not her taste but her love, nay need of it: earrings; long necklaces;

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heavy, multiple bracelets; also heavy, multiple rings, too many to count; ankle chains on both ankles. She "received" the officers in the drawing room, after they'd been shown in by the muscular youth with timid eyes who had answered the door.

"My husband?" She had a hard voice. "He disappeared. He disappeared eight years ago. Presumed dead six years ago."

"Well, he's now reappeared. At least, his corpse has."

The woman threw an angry glance at the youth who looked sheepishly away despite his well-toned bulk, hidden only by T-shirt and shorts and training shoes.

Hennessey saw the glance, as did Yellich. No police officer would have missed it. Both officers knew that this case was about to crack wide open.

"You may have seen the TV reports . . . the body on the canal towpath?"

A second angry glance at the youth, who was, it appeared, no more than eighteen or nineteen years of age. Hennessey wondered if he called Mrs. Watch "Mummy." It seemed that sort of relationship.

"When did you last see your husband, Mrs. Watch?"

"When I walked out on him. We had a row. I left him. He lived here in this huge house all by his little self for a while. Then he disappeared one night. During the bad winter."

"What did you row about?"

"Can't remember."

"You can't? Your last row and you can't remember what it was about?" Hennessey had been married. His wife had died young of natural causes, so natural not even the medics knew what had caused it and offered only "sudden death syndrome," which seemed embarrassingly inadequate to explain why a twenty-three-year-old woman of perfect health could suddenly collapse in the street as if in a faint, but in fact in death, probably before her head met the pavement. George and Jennifer Hennessey had had one row, it had taken place thirty years earlier, and he could recall it word for word. It had been about whether to have a pond in the garden or not. He had capitulated but wasn't able to dig the pond until two years after he had scattered her ashes in the garden, where he still went to talk to her each day, rain or shine.

"I can't. Something silly, like all rows, but it was the end. I left him then."

"No matter. The body on the towpath. It had mummified. It had been kept in airless conditions for eight years. Where? Would you know?"

"No."

Hennessey turned to the youth. "Do you know?"

"No . . ." He glanced at the woman and shook his head vigorously. He looked nervous. He had something to hide.

"Eight years ago, you were how old, son?"

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"Eleven."

"Got your life ahead of you, haven't you? Pity to throw it away on a murder charge."

"I didn't murder him."

"I'm sure you didn't, but if you had anything to do with the remains, the body, and placing it on the towpath, you can be charged with conspiracy to murder. Even eight years after the event, when at the time you were in short trousers learning algebra."

"And it could carry a life sentence," Yellich added.

The youth paled.

"Got a name, lad?"

"Kevin."

"Kevin what?"

"O'Reilly."

"All right Kevin, you're coming with us." Hennessey saw that there'd be no confession from Mrs. Watch. After eight years, forensic evidence would be difficult to prove.

"Is he under arrest?" Mrs. Watch flushed with anger.

"No, he's coming of his own volition, aren't you, Kevin?"

Kevin O'Reilly pulled nervously on the cigarette.

"Didn't think we'd get much out of you with madam the queen there." Hennessey smiled as he handed O'Reilly a white plastic beaker full of piping-hot coffee. "Believe me, you've got more to fear from her than you do from us. We, Sergeant Yellich here and me, we've been doing this for a long time. You've got guilt written all over your face, you're shaking like a leaf. You're in over your head, aren't you?"

Kevin O'Reilly nodded.

"Known her long?"

"About six months. We met at the gym."

"The gym?"

"She works out, desperate to keep her figure. She invited me home. It went from there. She made all the running . . . I was . . . I mean, I'd never . . ."

"All right, Kevin."

"Do I need a lawyer?"

"If you want one. But this is still off the record."

"Did you mean what you said about a life sentence?" O'Reilly looked at Yellich.

"Oh, yes. Technically it's possible. Unlikely, but possible. But you'll collect a good seven or eight years, minimum."

"I couldn't handle prison."

"I know you can't, Kevin. Big strong lad, but you're a little boy inside. I can see that."

"There's only one way you can avoid the gaol, Kevin."

"There is, isn't there?" He looked round the interview room, dark, spartan. "I moved the body, I left it where it was found."

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"Alone?"

"She drove the car. I told her I'd put it in the canal and it had sunk. She told me to do that, but I panicked. Just dropped it on the canal side."

"Where was the body kept?"

"In the cellar. There's a little alcove. She put the body in there, and then bricked it up. She has to sell the house, you see. She sold his business, lived off the proceeds for six years—holidays, clothes, jewellery. Mainly jewellery. You'll need a van to shift all her jewellery, she's got a room put aside just for the jewels. But the money's dried up so she's got to sell to raise money to live, move to a smaller house. 'Trading down,' she said. Anyway, couldn't sell the house with a body in the cellar. Now I think she picked me up in the gym for that job and that job alone. But she could have done it herself, there was no weight in him at all."

"Did she tell you she had killed him?"

"Not in so many words, but it all points that way."

"Does, doesn't it?"

"I've helped myself?"

"Hugely. You may even escape prosecution for this information." Hennessey smiled reassuringly. "All right, let's get this down in the form of a statement, then we'll get back and have a chat with Mrs. Watch." ●

BLOG BYTES (continued from p. 37)

something interesting to say. Bonus: Sometimes "Big Red" Amlingmeyer contributes to the blog.

And so I won't be neglectful of the group blogs like the ones I've mentioned here before, let me recommend *Femmes Fatales* (**http://femmesfatales.typepad.com**) maintained by Donna Andrews, Dana Cameron, Charlaine Harris, Julie Wray Herman, Toni L.P. Kelner, Marlys Millhiser, Kris Neri, Mary Saums, and Elaine Viets. You never know what topic will inspire them to write. It might be the mummy of Queen Hatshepsut, a trip to Greece, or the hardest part of a novel to write. Whatever the topic, this blog's always worth your time.

Another group blog worth your time is Writers Plot (**http://www.writersplot.typepad.com**), perpetrated by Sheila Connolly, Lorraine Bartlett, Doranna Durgin, Jeanne Munn Bracken, and Leann Sweeney. Whether it's Leann's musings on why she's addicted to Court TV, Sheila Connolly writing about word play, or one of the other regulars opining on whatever strikes her fancy, you'll find something of interest. And just in case you have plenty of time on your hands, there are links to the authors' individual blogs as well as to other blogs they read.

Bill Crider's own peculiar blog, Bill Crider's Pop Culture Magazine, can be found at **http://billcrider.blogspot.com** ●

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Room for Improvement

by Marilyn Todd

I looked at the couple hovering in the doorway, him in Savile Row, her all blue Chanel and pearls, and thought: so rich, so wholesome. So unhappy.

"Mr. and Mrs. Cuthbertson," he said by way of introduction, and there were enough plums in his mouth that I could have made jam, were I that way inclined. "We . . ." he cast a sideways glance at his wife, who had found a sudden need to check that the buttons on her jacket were in line. "We have an appointment with Mr. Hepburn."

"Please come in."

I made a point of glancing at the diary on my desk, then smiling at the clock on the wall in a way that commended their promptness. They were on the dot. And had no idea how the rough end of the law worked.

"I'm afraid Mr. Hepburn's been summoned to an urgent court appearance," I lied, shaking Mrs. Cuthbertson's limp white calfskin glove. "But he briefed me on your situation before he left, and asked me to run through the details with you."

This is the point where I bring out my most reassuring smile, proof that all those lengthy visits to the dentist do pay off.

"I'm his daughter, Lois." Ouch. Mr. Cuthbertson's handshake wasn't only solid, though. I detected a distinct Freemason squeeze. "I guarantee you the same level of confidence and discretion that my father would give you."

They glanced at each other, still a little uneasy. But they hadn't travelled all this way just to take the next train home.

"That's perfectly all right," Mrs. Cuthbertson said, and whatever her other faults, she was a terrible liar.

British writer Marilyn Todd, the author of several historical series, currently resides in Cognac, France. She returns to 1950s Britain for this tale. As she explains, "Back in the 'fifties, when divorce was almost impossible in Britain, the only sure way to sever a marriage was to prove adultery. As a result, unscrupulous solicitors employed even more unscrupulous detective agencies to fake the evidence. This is my take on that lack of scruples."

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"Yes, indeed." Her husband, now, he scored a little higher, but only a fraction, I'm afraid. "Y'see, Miss Hepburn, we would like this . . . business organized as quickly as possible."

And that indeed was the truth.

"Absolutely." I ushered the pair into my fictitious father's office before taking a seat behind my fictitious father's desk. After all, the year might be 1959 and Brighton might be Britain's most sophisticated town outside of London, but the world still wasn't ready for single female private investigators. To be honest, I'm not sure I was, either.

"My solicitor informs me that you can help speed up our divorce," Mrs. Cuthbertson said, in a manner that made it sound as though Stratton, Hall, and Stratton might yet be playing a practical joke.

"I can." This time I didn't smile, but steepled my fingers. "Though you need to understand what's involved."

Mr. Cuthbertson was the shuffling-in-his-chair kind. His wife was the avoid-direct-eye-contact type. I really did feel for them both.

"On the contrary, Mr. Stratton was specific," she said, toying with the clasp on her matching Chanel handbag. "Indeed, he went to some pains to explain how one of the very few grounds for a rapid divorce is adultery, and that providing proof can be given that one party has been indiscreet . . ." Her voice trailed off, and I noticed two bright red patches had sprung up to mar her immaculately rouged cheeks.

"Then there is a certain acceleration in the severance of the marriage that cuts years off the waiting time, yes," I finished for her. "But this isn't Reno, Mrs. Cuthbertson." Someone needed to point this out, and trust me, it was never going to be some posh, pinstriped solicitor. "One of you—" (usually the man, gentlemanly conduct and all that) "—needs to be photographed in what the courts like to describe as a compromising position."

"But you do the . . . uh . . . groundwork?" her husband asked.

"If you mean by booking a hotel room and hiring a co-respondent, then yes, Mr. Cuthbertson. This agency takes care of that."

As succinctly as possible, I ran through the procedure. The time for details was later, but this young couple needed to know here and now that evidence of not just a one-night stand but a long-standing, ongoing affair needed to be established. In practice, this was simply a matter of the man changing his tie for each of the photographs. The girls carried a change of clothing as a matter of course. I'd make lunch appointments every half-hour at different restaurants, dinner appointments in the evening, so there'd be wadges of photographs to lay before the court. The lovebirds holding hands between courses. The naughty couple toasting each other, whispering sweet nothings across the salt cellar, swanning in and out of hotels, that sort of thing.

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"I will provide a back-dated contract that shows Mrs. Cuthbertson approached this agency three months ago, asking us to investigate her husband's infidelity," I said, "but all this proves is that her husband has been meeting another woman over a period of time."

To grant her a divorce, the courts need meat on their bones.

"At a prearranged time, one of our agents—" I truly hoped I'd made it sound as though there was more than one of me—"goes to the hotel room, and because the courts require the corroboration of an independent witness, persuades the housekeeper to unlock the door." I paused. "Then we snap the client in as compromising a position as they can muster."

The men were uniformly reserved, but the girls had no such qualms. At the required moment, they threw caution and their brassières to the wind. No wonder the husbands looked so startled in the photos.

"Jolly good." Mr. Cuthbertson was relieved that his input to the arrangements would be minimal.

Mrs. Cuthbertson didn't even try to hide her joy at being left out of it completely. "That is excellent, Miss Hepburn," she gushed, and I swear that little feather in her hat perked up. "Really excellent."

I wasn't convinced excellent was the word.

"Are you quite sure this is what you want?" This time I spoke to Mr. Cuthbertson directly. "There's no going back," I told him. "You'll be publicly branded an adulterer, your name will be blazoned across the newspapers—"

"Miss Hepburn," his wife interrupted gently, "my husband and I married in haste, we have already repented. We have no desire to add to the leisure."

I wondered whether they always did their arguing in such civilised terms, or whether they'd simply passed beyond that stage.

"The thing is, Miss Hepburn, both Margaret and I have met someone else," Mr. Cuthbertson said. "We just want this marriage ended as quickly as possible, so we are free to marry again."

It all seemed so gracious and polite that I imagined the four of them round the Cuthbertson's elegant dining table, discussing it over a bottle of Margaux and a nice fillet steak. I thought it was about time someone added the mustard. "You *are* aware of the costs involved?"

"My family's in tractors and my husband is in baby foods," Mrs. Cuthbertson said, carelessly rubbing her diamonds. "Money is no object, Miss Hepburn."

"Then you're also aware of why this fast-track divorce ploy is so expensive?" I leaned across the desk and looked her husband squarely in the eye. "If anything goes wrong, it's not just you," I told him. "We could both end up in jail."

They glanced at each other, gulped, then nodded. Of the two, the

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wife's nod was the least grim, I decided.

But then she wasn't the one looking at porridge.

I want to make it very clear that what I do has no connection whatsoever with prostitution. Quite the opposite, in fact, because the girls I hire are usually married themselves and lead otherwise normal, respectable lives. It's just that, like me, they need the money —and for this kind of money, people take risks. Wouldn't you?

And it's because there's so much at stake, fixing up fake adultery cases, that I (a) charge exorbitant fees and (b) plan to the very last detail—then go over it time and again. That way, should anything go belly up, at least I have the satisfaction of having some money behind me to take care of Susan, plus I can wile away my stretch in the sure and certain knowledge that I did the best I could, which is all anyone can ask. Even crooked female private eyes.

So my confidence was pretty high as I took the elevator to the Belle Vue's second floor. Of course, that had as much to do with the hired mink as my meticulous forward planning, because even though I'd never earn enough to buy one for myself, you really do feel a million dollars wrapped inside real fur. And a girl certainly needs the right clothes in a hotel like the Belle Vue. For one thing, it's the best hotel by a mile, and that's where several of my competitors tripped up. They'd tried to cut costs, and realized too late that judges, especially divorce-court judges, aren't lemons. No man who has his shirts handmade in Jermyn Street books into a cheap hotel with an even cheaper floozy. So that's the first rule. Horses for courses, and since you only get the one chance in a place like the Belle Vue, you need to convince the housekeeper with a single glance that you're a bona fide guest who's foolishly left her key behind.

"Here we are, madam. Two-two-three."

The housekeeper made to knock, but I pointed to the "Do Not Disturb" sign hanging dutifully on the doorknob, and you'd be surprised how far a five-pound note still goes in the middle of an afternoon in 1959. While she jiggled the master key in the lock, I whipped my camera out of a vanity case designed for rather more feminine and undoubtedly more trivial activities, then checked the corridor for the billionth time. Still deserted, but on these carpets, you wouldn't hear a herd of wildebeest charging down on you. The lift whirred gently in the background.

"Say cheese," I breezed, as the housekeeper flung open the door.

"Jeez," the housekeeper said.

So used to all this, I'd taken the photo before I even realised. It was a man on the bed, all right, but he wasn't undressed and there was no sign of Mavis or her hired fox fur. (For the same reasons, I can't have Mavis wandering round the Belle Vue without looking the part, either). But to be honest, I wasn't surprised she'd done a

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bunk. His head lay at a horribly unnatural angle.

My first thought was for Mrs. Cuthbertson.

My second was to get the hell out of there.

"This situation needs to be handled with the utmost discretion," I told the housekeeper, backing carefully out of the room. "You fetch the manager. I'll wait here, to make sure no one goes in."

The trouble was, I couldn't hear myself speak, there was this terrible din in the background. Not what one expects from the Belle Vue, I thought idly. What on earth was the place coming to? Then I turned round.

So much for keeping it quiet, I realized, and so much for slipping away.

That din was the housekeeper's scream.

With no quick or easy way out, it was now a case of damage control. At the first screech, the lift boy, two chambermaids, some straight-backed, po-faced security manager, and a fat room-service waiter appeared out of nowhere, while there I was, camera in hand, pretending to be Mrs. Two-two-three. My gut instinct said play up the distraught widow thing, who's to say what grief will do, why *shouldn't* the poor wife run off, the girl's in shock? But it only goes to show. In the past, on the very few occasions I'd ever ordered room service, the waiters proved aloof and snooty specimens. Trust me to pick the breed's only bleeding heart. And then there was the Belle Vue's director.

"Drink this," he insisted, pushing a cognac into my hand, having personally escorted me down to his office.

"How kind," I sniffed, thinking, good, I can sneak away now, but compassion, it seems, has no bounds at plush hotels. He left a desk clerk as a deposit, and you wouldn't believe how fast the police can move, either. When they try.

So there I was, surrounded on all sides by red velvet and gilt while the piano in the foyer tinkled Gershwin, computing a multitude of likely stories. I pictured Mrs. Cuthbertson, fiddling with her handbag, fiddling with her pearls, and realized that I couldn't maintain the pretence of being her. Her marriage might be failing, but her husband had been willing to put his upper-crust reputation on the line for her, and in any case, a murder investigation would quickly reveal that I wasn't the genuine article. No, I'd have to be someone else who'd gone out without her damn room key. I warmed the cognac in my hand and sipped. Ultra smooth, but what else would one expect of the Belle Vue. And the more I thought about it, the better this scenario played out. If I was a woman who was stupid enough to forget her room key, I was certainly stupid enough to get the numbers muddled up. I finished off the brandy and pasted on my coy-but-nonetheless-ravishing smile for the benefit of the desk clerk. After all, who *better* to probe about the current guest list?

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Within ten minutes, I was Mrs. Henry Martin, newlywed bride, because if honeymoons don't make a girl jittery, what the hell does? Not the sex. The fact that she's committing to a lifetime with someone, bearing his children, washing his socks. That would scare the pants off me, I can tell you. So. Providing the police didn't interrogate me in the presence of the desk clerk (300-1), there was no way of being caught out on my story, especially since the Martins had gone sightseeing in Eastbourne and would not be back before supper (7:30 onwards, dinner jackets only).Yes, indeed. Between the mink and the cognac, my confidence was restored and while the desk clerk answered the director's phone, I whipped the film from my camera and stuffed it behind my suspender.

"Inspector Sullivan is on his way down to see you," he announced, but even before he'd finished, the door had opened and the entire gap was filled by a man with a mop of unruly dark hair and a face that looked like it had come second in a fight with a brick wall.

I stood up, though if I wasn't to be at a height disadvantage, I'd really need to stand on a chair. Still, I was ready, and I ran through the key points in my head. Mrs. Martin. Just married. Nervous. Excited. Definitely light-headed. Then—

"Don't I know you?" Inspector Sullivan asked, and his voice was rough from too many cigarettes, too little sleep. "Mrs. Hepburn, right?" I *hate* conscientious policemen.

"Miss."

"You run Hepburn Investigations?"

No point in stalling. I brought out my card. "Clients with confidence," I said with none.

"Hm." He chewed his lip, rubbed his jaw, ran his hand through his hair. And all the time his eyes were fixed on my camera.

My thoughts were of Susan. Growing up with her aunt. Visiting her mother in jail. Rapidly becoming estranged . . .

"If I didn't know better," Sullivan said at length, "I'd say you were fixing up one of those phoney divorce cases."

I said nothing for the simple reason that the next person I intended talking to was my lawyer.

"Only the problem there," he said, "is that Mr. Hall wasn't married."

Mr. Who? Then the penny dropped. I may have *booked* room two-twenty-three for Mr. Cuthbertson and the lovely Mavis, but now I started to think about something other than covering my own backside, I realized that Mr. Cuthbertson wouldn't have been seen dead (pardon the pun) in a pale blue check suit. Relief made my knees tremble.

"So do you mind telling me why you burst in on an unmarried commercial traveller to take his photograph, Miss Hepburn?"

In fact I was so overcome with relief that I nearly blurted out the truth.

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"That new road-safety officer came to the school again today."

Susan was sitting on my lap braiding my hair, and although she's a little too old and (dare I say it) a little too heavy, such moments are rare. For this reason alone, they are precious.

"He's a scream," she gushed. "Ever so funny."

I really, really didn't want to talk about policemen right then, but children can be immeasurably cruel.

"Do you know what happens if you don't look right?" she persisted, using my spiky, mismatched plaits as handlebars. I shook my head as best I could. "You go *wrong*," she squealed.

Maybe I would also have found this excruciatingly funny if I'd been nine years old. Somehow I doubted it.

"Do you have a crush on this teacher of yours?" Because suddenly there was me just turned seventeen, Mr. Rolands my old maths master, and the only good thing to come out of that affair weighed seven and a half pounds and has his beautiful, soft golden hair.

"Oh, Mum!" Susan rolled her eyes. "The road-safety man's not a teacher, and anyway he's *old*."

What constitutes old to a nine-year-old? Mr. Rolands turned out to be thirty-six, and even now, I still wonder how I fell for that old I'll-leave-my-wife line.

"So's Rock Hudson," I pointed out, "but his face is plastered all over your bedroom wall."

"That's different, he's a film star." She stopped braiding and sighed. "If I had a daddy, I'd like him to be like the road-safety man. He's *ever* so handsome."

If I had a daddy . . .? Next she'd be pulling out my fingernails with pliers.

"More handsome than Elvis?" I asked, because all good mothers know how to change the subject, and within no time we were jiving round the living room to "Jailhouse Rock," "Blue Suede Shoes," and generally getting "All Shook Up."

It was only later, with Susan tucked up in bed and me patiently untangling the knots in my hair, that the enormity of what I'd risked today hit me. I could have lost everything, and I do mean everything, on the turn of a door key. I needed to think seriously about the future. When the next solicitor telephoned, asking could I help out, would I? *Would I risk it?* I let Elvis run through "Don't Be Cruel" and thought, damn right I would. My daughter is not going to end up an unmarried mother at the age of seventeen. Susan's a bright kid, on course for the grammar school, and what's more, she's desperate to go. But. I reached for as wide a toothed comb as I could find. Grammar schools are expensive. There's the uniforms, the tennis racquets, the hockey sticks, the music lessons, not forgetting innumerable bus trips and a million other extra hidden costs. Truly, though, I do not care. My daughter will never be

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forced to earn her living grubbing through dustbins, following faithless husbands down lovers' lanes, or tracing children who've run away because their home life's so damned wretched. Never. I will do whatever it takes to keep Susan from violent men and abusive women, and she will never need to take covert shots of homosexuals or men with prostitutes simply to pay the rent. Maybe, once she starts attending the grammar school, she'll be ashamed of me. Of what I do and what I am. I hope not, I really, really do. But that's another risk I am prepared to take.

All the same, I don't sleep well. I worry.

"Miss Hepburn."

I recognised that distinctive gravel without needing to look up. "Inspector."

He lumbered into the inner office where I was typing up a perfectly legitimate infidelity assignment, but did not sit down. I wished to God I'd locked the filing cabinets, or even closed that open drawer, but Sullivan didn't glance at them. To be honest, I would have rifled through every last one, had I been in his shoes.

"Room two-two-three," he said, leaning with his back against the wall and folding his arms over his chest. "Rented one night to Stanley Hall, aged twenty-six, commercial rep in motor oil."

I didn't know Stanley Hall, had never heard of Stanley Hall, could swear on a stack of Bibles that I was not involved with anything connected to Stanley Hall, and with great enthusiasm, I imparted this knowledge. "I know sod all about motor oil, too," I added with gusto.

"Hm." Sullivan scratched his cheek and stared at the sparrows pecking at the crumbs along the windowsill. "What about a Mr. and Mrs. Cuthbertson?" he asked, still not bothering to look at me. "Know anything about them?"

At times like this there's nothing else a girl can do but drop her file on the floor. "Name doesn't ring a bell," I said, although my voice was a tad muffled, seeing as how my head was stuck under the desk.

"No?" His suddenly appeared on the other side, and for large hands, they were surprisingly deft at picking up foolscap. "Only Mrs. Cuthbertson made a reservation yesterday morning, specifically asking for that particular room."

I like that room, I wanted to say. It faces the sea front, and from the bandstand you can, if you stand on the furthestmost bench to the right, get a half-decent snap of anyone in the bay window. The courts liked that sort of thing, especially when they were presented with photos of the clients closing the curtains. Furtive always goes down well with a judge.

"Really?" I scrabbled for an imaginary paper clip.

"It probably doesn't mean anything," he said, actually finding one. "Maybe they'd stayed there on their honeymoon, maybe she

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just liked the view."

"Maybe," I said and, still on my knees, pretended to arrange the scattered papers, even though I knew I'd never find anything in this damned file again.

"Who knows?" If he wasn't craggy when he smiled, how come the wolf in Little Red Riding Hood suddenly sprang to mind? "But it seems they were so disappointed that the guest in two-twenty-three hadn't booked out as expected that when the Cuthbertsons were given three-seventeen, they hardly stayed more than a couple of hours."

"Oh?" I murmured, rubbing the bump where I'd brought up my head sharply.

"I expect it's a class thing," he said, straightening up and brushing the dust off his trousers. "All the same, though." He paused. "Don't you think it's strange they didn't check in until two-thirty-five, yet were gone by the time I went to question them at half-past four?"

Was that squeak as noncommittal a squeak as I'd hoped? Because here's the thing. I'd agreed to supply the Cuthbertsons with evidence for a quick divorce. Their deposit was already earning interest in Susan's trust fund. So the minute Sullivan had finished questioning me the day before, I'd flown upstairs to three-one-seven, stuffed a new film in the camera, and grabbed the nearest chambermaid.

At this point, I want to tell you about Mavis. She's nowhere near as common as her name suggests, and very pretty with it, in a busty sort of way. But her husband left her for a bus conductress last September and . . . well, to cut a long story short, Mavis gets what I suppose you'd call lonely. I guess Mr. Cuthbertson got bored waiting for my knock.

I think it's safe to say that this was one set of evidence the divorce courts would not be querying.

"Can I go to the park with Lynn and Josie, Mum?"

"Yes, of course." I know the park warden. The girls will be fine. He beat that last flasher to a pulp.

"There's a bag of bread for the ducks," I said, nodding towards the table. "But take a scarf, love, it's cold."

"Mum!" She dragged it into two syllables. "It's summer."

"It's the second of October. Take a scarf."

I couldn't help but smile, hearing her belt out "Hound Dog" at the top of her little off-key voice while she skipped upstairs to fetch it. You keep that crush on Elvis, I thought happily. You dream about Rock Hudson, girl.

"You look over your shoulder,
Before you stick your right arm out.
When it's clear, then you manoeuvre . . ."

"That's not Elvis."

"It's what the road-safety officer taught us. He says that if you sing

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it to your favourite song, *then you ain't gonna get mown down . . .*"

As I stuffed sage and onion into a chicken, I consoled myself with the fact that the RSO was "old," and that if she did have a crush on him, she'd soon grow out of it. Lightning surely can't strike twice?

"And you wrap it round your neck," I insisted.

My daughter knows when she is beaten. She might have stuck her tongue out, but that scarf went round twice.

"Mummy, what's a bastard?"

Four pounds of poultry slid straight through my fingers. Nine years I'd been waiting for this moment. Every single day for nine years I'd braced myself. And I *still* wasn't ready.

"It's . . . someone whose parents aren't married, darling." I have a feeling my voice was rather quaky as I explained the intricacies of illegitimacy, the fact that there was still a stigma attached to such children, though there shouldn't be because it certainly wasn't their fault, and that anyone who called children by that name ought to be shot.

"So when Peter Bailey called Jimmy Tate a little bastard, he was being horrid?" she asked, tipping her head on one side.

"P-Peter Bailey?"

"In the playground yesterday. Jimmy took his penknife and dropped it down the drain, so Peter called him a dirty little—"

"Hey! That's enough bad language out of you, my girl!"

Relief rushed through me like water down a flood drain, and my knees were still imitating aspens as the door banged behind her, so much so, I didn't even yell at her for slamming. But as she wheeled her bike adroitly through the gate then pedalled down the road, it wasn't really Susan I was seeing. It was maths teachers. It was schoolgirl crushes, sleepless nights, schoolgirls growing into typists, then bumping into her old teacher one summer's day.

Why, Mr. Rolands! Those same old palpitations.

Please. It's Stephen, now.

I should have stuck with "Mr.", because images of stolen kisses, secret meetings, declarations of true love flashed through at breakneck speed, and no doubt it was the pain of that damned chicken landing on my toe, but my eyes were watering like crazy. All I could think of were promises and reassurances that were as empty as his heart.

And over the kitchen chair, draped casually, as if by chance, hung Susan's scarf.

"Are you busy, Lois?"

Lois. He calls me Lois now. "I'm always busy, Sullivan. It's how I pay the rent."

I shoved the incriminating photographs of Mr. Cuthbertson back in the envelope, and thought, *Really, Mavis! That's no way to treat a hired fox fur!* And that's when you realize that, civilized or not in

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the way rich people handle things, the cracks in that marriage were very wide indeed.

"I know how you pay the rent," Sullivan rumbled, and there seemed twice as much gravel in his mouth this time. "That's why I want to talk about the camera you were waving round room two-two-three." He made himself comfortable perching on the edge of the desk and I thanked God it was solid oak. "You're sure there was no film in it?"

"I showed you. It was empty." I can do innocent. You just bulge your big brown eyes. "I even let you go through my handbag and pockets at the time."

"Women have a surprising number of storage facilities," he said in a way that suggested the species was foreign to him. "Tell me you're not holding back on me, Lois."

"But I explained."

"Yes." He nodded patiently. "You were visiting an old school friend, a Mrs. Martin, on her honeymoon, in your hired mink, of course—"

"Who says it's hired?" I asked indignantly.

"Lois, you rent a ground-floor flat on Albert Street, which is not a prime location, where you live with your daughter and no husband, and you also pay the rent on these offices, which are in a prime location but which are far too large for you, in order to sustain the fiction that this is a much bigger business than it is. Does a woman in that position really splash out on furs?"

"I wanted to impress my friend." It sounded weak, even to me.

"I'm sure bursting in unannounced with a blank camera would have been very impressive indeed. Had Mrs. Martin ever heard of you. Had you not asked the housekeeper to open room two-two-three with her master key. Had—"

"All right, that was a lie." What else could I do, but admit it? "But I'm going to claim client confidentiality here, Sullivan, and you'll just have to take my word that it has nothing to do with Stanley Hall's murder."

That grunt sounded unconvinced, but he didn't follow up.

"As for the film," I said, "There were a dozen witnesses who can swear I never touched that camera, including the Belle Vue's director, his security manager, and that stuffy little desk clerk."

"I know." There it was again. That wolf-from-Little-Red-Riding-Hood smile. "Which is why I'm asking you directly."

"Then trust me." I'm also very good at lying directly. "There was no film in the camera and no photograph of Mr. Hall sprawled with his neck at right angles on that bed."

"Right angles, eh." He looked at his watch. Looked at the clock on my wall. Checked with the church clock over the street. They all read eight minutes to one. "Get your coat, Lois."

My heart sank. This meant police stations, formal questioning, warrants to search my offices and home and, even as he held the door open for me, I was frantically working on ways to weasel out of the lie.

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"I don't know why you women wear high heels, if walking in them makes you limp," he said, in the street.

"It's not the shoes. I dropped a chicken on my foot."

"Hm," he said, and I'm not sure at what point he linked my arm through his, but the support certainly made walking easier. "Right, then. Here we go."

I thought he meant the car, although I wouldn't normally have associated beige sports models with police cars. Instead, he meant the restaurant, decked out in red, white, and green stripes.

"Surprised?"

"You could say that." Italian, too. "You struck me as the sort who only eats at the police canteen."

"You struck me as the sort who doesn't eat at all," he said, looking me up and down as if I were a racehorse, and I must admit I do lose track of time when I'm working, but was I honestly that bony? I looked at my wrists and thought, damn.

"How did you get into the P.I. business?" he asked, over antipasti of sardines and tomatoes.

It seemed an innocuous enough question, so I explained how I'd been temping as a shorthand typist in a solicitor's (no one offers unmarried mothers permanent employment), and how, during the course of my assignment, I was privy to various telephone conversations between the partners and firms of private eyes. It didn't need Einstein to calculate the difference between shorthand typing and the amount of money that could be made from divorce. Strangely, it took me right through the saltimbocca and halfway into my tiramisu to explain all this, though I omitted to mention that this was the first time I'd ever told anyone my history.

"You never wanted to get married?"

"To the father of my child? Of course I did!" What kind of strumpet did he take me for? "Unfortunately, he never had any intention of leaving his wife and at the first sniff of the word pregnancy, he dropped me like a brick."

No offer of child support. In fact, no support of any kind. And he knew I was far too sweet to go blabbing to his wife.

"Dammit, Sullivan, he even denied the baby was his!"

"I, er, meant afterwards. The last few years."

Oh. "Too busy," I said, and then, in another burst of unaccustomed frankness (I blame the Chianti), I admitted that no one had ever asked me. "Men aren't exactly tripping over themselves to put a ring on an unmarried mother's finger."

Instead they think of us as easy, which is why I took up judo and why I make Susan go to classes every Tuesday.

"What about you?" I asked, calming down over the coffee. "Are you married?"

"Nope." He shrugged. "Engaged once, but she didn't like the hours I kept and married a nine-to-five accountant. Then again."

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He grinned. "It might have been because I'm so damned ugly."

Not handsome, that's for sure. Craggy/rugged/lived-in, call it what you will, that face was never going to end up on an advertising poster. But ugly . . . ?

"We'd better go," he said. "The restaurant is closing."

Was it? I hadn't realised we'd been sitting there so long, and though I can't remember how we ended up going from trattoria to cinema, I have vague recollections of someone saying something about Cary Grant, which led to the fact that *North by Northwest* was playing at the Odeon, which in turn led to there being just enough time to catch the matinee before I met my daughter after tap class.

I knew full well what Sullivan was playing at. Softening me up, winning me over, drawing me into his confidence. It wouldn't work, I didn't care. It was the first time I'd been to the pictures in a decade. I'd forgotten what popcorn tasted like. It tasted bloody good.

October turned to November. Sunshine turned to rain. The nights began to draw in really fast. From time to time, like twice a week, Sullivan would drop by my office to discuss the Belle Vue murder—or at least vent his frustration at the lack of leads and progress—and invariably we'd end up having lunch or taking in a film. *Ben-Hur. Rio Bravo. Some Like It Hot* with Jack Lemmon and Marilyn Monroe.

"I just wish I could find a motive," he would say, spiking his fingers through that dark, unruly mop. "The door was locked, there was no key on the inside, and commercial reps in motor oil can't break their own necks, that's for sure."

"Not and lock the door afterwards," I'd agree, and trust me, I did feel sympathy. Needless to say, had I believed that holding back that photograph prevented him from bringing the perpetrator to justice, I'd have mailed it to him—anonymously, of course. Okay, he'd know it was me (even though I'd have denied it with my dying breath), but there was still the possibility, however remote, that someone else had snapped the dead man in that hotel bedroom. But I'd studied that picture over and over. It was just a dead man in a hotel bedroom, end of story.

"He'd stayed at the Belle Vue several times, that's the silly part."

The first time Sullivan kissed me was during the chariot race in *Ben-Hur*, and if anyone ever tells you that's exciting, believe you me, it was nothing compared to the thrill of that kiss. I decided there and then that I liked being softened up, won over, drawn into a policeman's confidence. Torture me all you like, Officer, I still won't tell.

"I guess he made enemies in Brighton—"

"Motor oil is a dangerous business," I grinned.

"But legitimate," he said. "I checked, and he had genuine appointments in Brighton on every occasion that he stayed at the Belle Vue, even though the company he worked for didn't spring for their uncompromising rates."

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That was odd, I thought. Usually reps stayed at fleapits and charged the higher allowance to make a bob or two, not the other way around. I was about to point this out, even though I'm sure Sullivan was way ahead of me, but then he leaned over the table and kissed me full on the mouth and in public, and it went straight out of my head. I had other things to worry about.

"My daughter has a crush on her road-safety officer," I said. Lately we'd taken to having lunch on Saturdays, when Susan went to Josie's. "She thinks he's handsome, clever, funny, a real scream—"

"That doesn't sound like a crush." The gravel in his throat churned up in laughter. "It sounds to me like she's found a friend, but in any case, where's the harm? She's nine."

"Hero worship? Nothing." I downed half a glass of wine in a single swallow. "Providing she grows out of it."

And there it was again, too much damned Chianti, because suddenly I was blurting out my own stupidity at falling in love with an older, married man—

"Whoa." His hand covered mine and half the table. "Why do you keep blaming yourself? The bastard knew exactly what he was doing, Lois. He's the one who preyed on your youth and innocence. He's the one who led you on, lied to you, and cheated. And Lois, he's the one who bailed when you got pregnant."

I'd never really thought of it like that, any more than I'd imagined Stephen Rolands as a child molester, who ought to be locked up and the damn key thrown away for good. If Sullivan ever got his hands on him, so help him, he said, Rolands would need a bloody plastic surgeon. What odds the bastard was still doing it today?

"Is he still teaching?"

"Long Road Secondary Modern, but—"

"But nothing. You said yourself, you'd only just turned seventeen, but times have changed in ten years, Lois. Rock and roll has taken over, Teddy boys are in, girls are wearing makeup, looking older. I'll bet you a pound to a penny Rolands is targeting fifteen-year-olds or younger."

I wanted to do something, say something, be really grown up about this business of scales dropping from the eyes. Instead I burst into tears.

"Don't worry, we'll stop him," Sullivan said softly. "He won't ruin any more lives, you have my word."

"It's not that," I blubbed. In fact, it wasn't even the thought of Susan's father rotting in jail—nothing half so noble.

The thing is, right up till that moment, I'd genuinely believed that I was special.

It's surprising how businesslike you become when there are no illusions left. How detached you feel snapping adulterous husbands with mistresses/call girls/rent boys and in places most decent peo-

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ple couldn't imagine, or how disconnected you become furnishing cast-iron proof of wives with gambling addictions, drug addictions, lovers, or just a love affair with the bottle. After all, who was I to judge what constitutes an unfit mother? I only needed to take one look in the mirror.

As a result, shades of grey no longer figured in my life. My job was to secure Susan's future, and whereas before, when it came to runaway children, my heart was torn between finding them and reporting their whereabouts to their parents, I simply reminded myself that if I hadn't intended to return them, I shouldn't have taken the job in the first place. Black and white worked well. With the cheque from Mrs. Cuthbertson's solicitor, for instance, I could send Susan on a foreign-exchange visit, maybe two. Her life would never be like mine.

So Guy Fawkes Night came and went. We roasted potatoes in the bonfire, let off rockets from a milk bottle, tied Catherine wheels to the next-door neighbour's shed, and frightened his dog with our jumping jacks. Susan took up ice skating and fell in love with horses, and since cases didn't come in any faster, I found myself with more time on my hands than I'd ever known.

That's what comes from being too efficient.

Which is why I was sitting at my desk one Wednesday afternoon, poring over the photograph of Stanley Hall's dead body.

Someone broke his neck with one clean snap, Sullivan told me, shortly after the results of the postmortem had come through. That, to me, suggested someone who'd been in the army. You can't kill that cleanly and that swiftly without training and (I'm sad to say) without practice. Then there was the trunk. Commercial representatives in motor oil don't lug around huge amounts of samples. There are no demonstration models to tuck away in cases. For one night's stay, he wouldn't need much in the way of change of clothing, and as a lowly rep aged twenty-six from a council house in London's notorious East End, he was unlikely to be sporting a tuxedo.

I made myself a cup of tea and dunked a ginger nut. Why the Belle Vue, either? I'd never met Stanley Hall and maybe it was unfair to judge, but somehow I wasn't getting the impression that this was his own special personal treat. That blue check suit was more at home on a bookie's runner than at Brighton's top hotel. If Hall was pampering himself on the sly, subsidising the room rate out of his own pocket, surely he'd have treated himself to more apposite attire? Or at least, like me, rented something suitable? Questions, questions, questions. I could see why Sullivan was so frustrated. The difference was, he had a dozen other cases to work on, while I had nothing to distract me except a bit of filing and maybe window cleaning. (It's Christmas that widens the gulf in marriages to the point of irrevocability. Not the run-up).

More tea. More ginger nuts. And I guess it's all that osso bucco and fettuccine, but I noticed the other day that my hips have got

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some shape at last, and those poached eggs on my chest no longer need so much cotton wool inside their bra. And I thought of Stanley Hall. His body still not released for burial. What his poor mother must be going through—

"Sullivan, it's me. Well, no, it's not *me*, of course, it's the security manager. That's who killed Stanley Hall."

"Lois, slow down. You're running all your words into one."

"Then listen faster, Sullivan. Why didn't Stanley Hall check out on time?"

"Because he was dead, darling."

"Yes, but why didn't someone go and check? He was supposed to have vacated the room by 9:30 in the morning, yet the "Do Not Disturb" sign was still hanging on the doorknob after lunch. Someone either told Housekeeping that this was fine—"

"She says cleaning two-twenty-three wasn't on her list."

"Exactly. Or, if you'd only let me get a word in edgeways, someone deleted that room number from her roster. And the only other person who has access to the housekeeper's room is the manager of security!"

After eight years in the P.I. business, I know hotels inside out.

"The very first thing that struck me about him was his military bearing," I continued firmly, before he could interrupt again. "I can't be sure, but you check his army records and if he didn't serve in Korea and have experience of one-to-one combat, I'll eat my brand-new pedal pushers."

"Please don't, you look unendurably sexy in them." I could hear his pencil scratching down the line. "So assuming you're right, that's taken care of means and opportunity. How about a motive?"

"Don't CID ever talk to ordinary people?"

All it needed was a few discreet enquiries of the staff at the Belle Vue—and okay, I admit it, a few discreet ten-pound notes as well—to drag out the fact that three or four times in the past year, some of their clients had been robbed.

"The desk clerk confirmed—incidentally, I'm expecting Her Majesty's police force to reimburse me for these expenses—but anyway, he confirmed that these robberies coincided with every one of Stanley Hall's visits."

That's why that loud check suit didn't matter. He never intended leaving the room. It was the security manager who had both keys and access. He who stole money, jewels, various other valuables.

"Just a few bits here and there, and never enough to justify the Belle Vue's guests calling the police, but enough to launch an in-house investigation."

In which their upright, vetted, army veteran was hardly going to investigate himself!

"Stanley Hall was the fence?"

"If you've ever been to the East End, Sullivan . . ."

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I didn't tell him this was where I was born, or that, council house or not, my family still disowned me, not just for being an unmarried mother, but for being a P.I. to boot. The shame is just too much to bear.

"That's why he needed such a large trunk, and I'll bet that's why he was killed."

"He started to get greedy?"

It would have been the perfect murder, had it not been for me and the Cuthbertsons' divorce. Because having calmly hung the "Do Not Disturb" sign on the door he'd locked behind him, the security manager was waiting until the midafternoon lull before removing his accomplice's body, and in the victim's own trunk, too. No wonder he'd arrived so quickly on the murder scene. No wonder he'd looked so bloody grim. But equally . . . I stared into the telephone. If it hadn't been for me hanging on to evidence, he could have got away with it. I tried to console myself with the fact that at least now Mrs. Hall could bury her son in time for Christmas. Tried is the operative word.

"By the way, Sullivan, one other thing."

"What's that?"

"Did you just call me darling?"

Susan was wheeling her bike down the hall on her way to Josie's when I heard her call out, "Hello, Mr. Sullivan."

I blinked. I hadn't associated him with either ice skating or pony rides.

"Hello, Susan." He tapped her on the head with a rolled-up page of foolscap. "Still practising what I taught you?"

She laughed, in a happy, friendly, offhandedly familiar sort of way before bursting into song in the front doorway.

"You look over your shoulder
Before you stick your right arm out.
When it's clear, then you manoeuvre . . ."

She was still Hound-Dogging away as the door slammed in her wake, and if she leaves that scarf behind one more time, I'll throttle her with the bloody thing.

"*You're* the road-safety officer?"

It was the first time he'd come to the flat, and I'd reckoned on Susan being gone by eleven-thirty. She's usually pretty prompt. Else I dock her pocket money.

"That's me. Handsome, funny, clever . . . and what was that other thing again?"

"Old," I snapped. "And you could at least have the decency to look sheepish."

"Why? Susan and I hit it off straightaway, it's how I knew who you were, remember? You're all she talks about, you know."

"Really?" It takes pathetically little to make a mother's heart swell.

"Uh-huh." His nose wrinkled. "Until Rusty the pony came along, anyway."

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It's only a small flat and he seemed to fill up most of it. "Here," he said, handing me the sheet. "I thought you'd like a copy of the security manager's confession." He glanced at me from the corner of his eye as he made us both a cup of coffee. "Are you sure you didn't write it for him? It's almost word for word what you told me."

I was so busy reading that it took me a few minutes to realize how quickly he'd made himself at home. Or how right it felt.

"Female intuition," I said glibly.

"And a good memory," he said, concentrating surprisingly hard on stirring coffee that contained neither milk nor sugar. "The size of that trunk? The colour and design of his suit? Neck at right angles to the body? One might almost say photographic."

In a book, I'd have had the grace to blush. In real life, I stared him out.

"A word of advice, though, Lois." When he leaned back in the chair, I heard it creak. Then again, it could have been a low chuckle in the back of his throat. "Next time, either tuck the roll into the inside of your stocking or wear a less figure-hugging skirt. By the way, happy birthday," he said, tossing a box across the table.

No point in asking who had told him. "What is it?"

"What does it look like?"

It looked like a diamond solitaire. "A reward from the Belle Vue?"

"Are you kidding? Those people won't even give their fleas away." His craggy face grew serious. "Lois, please say you're not going to make me go down on one knee."

I dropped the box. We banged heads picking it up.

"You're asking me to *marry* you?"

"Why not?" He ran his hand over his jaw. "I get free housing through my job, which would save you rent on this place, for a start. Then it's not like Susan and I don't get on." *If I had a daddy, I'd like him to be like the road-safety man.* "And . . . well . . ."

"Well what?" This time I was determined he would do it.

"And I love you."

I loved him too, but I was holding that one up my sleeve. "I won't change what I do, Sullivan. I'll still be Hepburn Investigations with seedy divorces and even seedier clients."

"It never occurred to me that you would change, Lois, and I don't want you to. Not ever."

"I still bank my cheques in Susan's trust fund?"

"Absolutely."

I told him I supposed it was a deal, only on this occasion we didn't seal it with a handshake. Afterwards, and once you could wipe the grin off my face, because that's something else I hadn't done in a decade, I have to admit that committing to a lifetime with someone didn't seem half so scary.

Slowly, the world turned back to a million shades of grey. ●

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2007 EQMM Readers Award Ballot

2007 was a year of variety for *EQMM*. Our offerings covered a wide spectrum in terms of style, with classical whodunits and locked-room mysteries side by side with hardboiled private-eye stories and crime noir. New countries were added to Passport to Crime, and new voices joined those of *EQMM*'s longtime contributors: seven of them in the Department of First Stories. Amidst all this variety it wasn't easy to spot a trend that might characterize the year, but there may be one in the number of collaborations we saw.

There were the standard collaborations, with two authors sharing the process of plotting and writing a single story. We published one belonging to the classical and one to the hardboiled school in 2007. We also presented what might be called a collaboration in concept, in which three distinguished authors took the same newspaper article as the starting point for their separate tales. Then there was the collaboration of a husband and wife team in which the characters created by one and used in a new *EQMM* story were picked up by the other for a separate, matching piece. Finally, there was a tale by a two-sister writing team, under their well-known byline, that turned out to be a solo work—the very first—of one of them. How pleased Ellery Queen—a.k.a. Frederic Dannay and Manfred B. Lee—would be to see so many crime writers following in their collaborative footsteps!

We hope you enjoyed these and all of the other stories published in 2007, but if you didn't, your readers award ballot is the perfect place to give *EQMM*'s editors feedback. Please be specific. Tell us what types of fiction you'd like to see more or less of, and which authors we should try to feature more frequently.

Last year on your Readers Award ballot we posed this question: Should Readers Award voting be limited to subscribers? The tally of replies gave an even split between yeses and nos. We will therefore continue to encourage voting by both subscribers and store-purchasers of *EQMM*. However, we strongly encourage everyone to read as many of the year's issues as possible before casting a vote. The award you are bestowing has come to have considerable weight with authors, editors, and publishers, and should represent your choice for the best of all of the stories that have appeared in *EQMM* in 2007.

The rules this year are the same as in the past. A point system will apply in counting the total number of votes received, with all first-place choices receiving three points, second-place choices two

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points, and third-place choices one point. The story receiving the highest number of points will be the winner.

If you can't recall a story title or its author, please describe the plot as briefly as you can. Please do not vote for anything other than fiction. The Jury Box is not eligible for this award, nor is Blog Bytes.

Return the ballot itself (no copies will be accepted) to the address below, postmarked no later than December 12.

The 2007 Readers Award winning story will be announced in the May 2008 issue. If you would like to learn the results of the voting before the May issue goes to subscribers and newsstands, please send a standard-sized stamped envelope with your name and address (include it with your ballot if you like) and you will hear back from us by late January.

My first selection for the 2007 Readers Award is:

My second selection is:

My third selection is:

Comments:

Mail to: **The Editors**
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PASSPORT TO CRIME

A MALEFACTOR

by Anton Chekhov

Translated from the Russian by Constance Garnett

This month Passport to Crime brings back a classic tale from one of the world's greatest short-story writers, in English translation. Several of Chekhov's stories, including this one, were reprinted in *EQMM* in the magazine's early decades as part of Ellery Queen's attempt to show that virtually every great writer the world has produced wrote at least one story that could be considered to belong to the crime genre.

An exceedingly lean little peasant, in a striped hempen shirt and patched drawers, stands facing the investigating magistrate. His face is overgrown with hair and pitted with smallpox, and his eyes, scarcely visible under thick, overhanging eyebrows, have an expression of sullen moroseness. On his head there is a perfect mop of tangled, unkempt hair, which gives him an even more spider-like air of moroseness. He is barefooted.

"Denis Grigoryev!" the magistrate begins. "Come nearer, and answer my questions. On the seventh of this July the railway watchman, Ivan Semyonovitch Akinfov, going along the line in the morning, found you at the hundred-and-forty-first mile engaged in unscrewing a nut by which the rails are made fast to the sleepers. Here it is, the nut! . . . With the aforesaid nut he detained you. Was that so?"

"Wha-at?"

"Was this all as Akinfov states?"

"To be sure, it was."

"Very good; well, what were you unscrewing the nut for?"

"Wha-at?"

"Drop that 'wha-at' and answer the question; what were you

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unscrewing the nut for?"

"If I hadn't wanted it, I shouldn't have unscrewed it," croaks Denis, looking at the ceiling.

"What did you want that nut for?"

"The nut? We make weights out of those nuts for our lines."

"Who is 'we'?"

"We, people. . . .The Klimovo peasants, that is."

"Listen, my man; don't play the idiot with me, but speak sensibly. It's no use telling lies here about weights!"

"I've never been a liar from a child, and now I'm telling lies . . ." mutters Denis, blinking. "But can you do without a weight, your honour? If you put live bait or maggots on a hook, would it go to the bottom without a weight? . . . I am telling lies," grins Denis. . . . "What the devil is the use of the worm if it swims on the surface! The perch and the pike and the eelpout always go to the bottom, and a bait on the surface is only taken by a shillisper, not very often then, and there are no shillispers in our river. . . . That fish likes plenty of room."

"Why are you telling me about shillispers?"

"Wha-at? Why, you asked me yourself! The gentry catch fish that way too in our parts. The silliest little boy would not try to catch a fish without a weight. Of course, anyone who did not understand might go to fish without a weight. There is no rule for a fool."

"So you say you unscrewed this nut to make a weight for your fishing line out of it?"

"What else for? It wasn't to play knuckle-bones with!"

"But you might have taken lead, a bullet. a nail of some sort. . . ."

"You don't pick up lead in the road, you have to buy it, and a nail's no good. You can't find anything better than a nut. . . . It's heavy, and there's a hole in it."

"He keeps pretending to be a fool! As though he'd been born yesterday or dropped from heaven! Don't you understand, you blockhead, what unscrewing these nuts leads to? If the watchman had not noticed it the train might have run off the rails, people would have been killed—you would have killed people."

"God forbid, your honour! What should I kill them for? Are we heathens or wicked people? Thank God, good gentlemen, we have lived all our lives without ever dreaming of such a thing. . . . Save, and have mercy on us, Queen of Heaven! . . . What are you saying?"

"And what do you suppose railway accidents do come from? Unscrew two or three nuts and you have an accident."

Denis grins, and screws up his eye at the magistrate incredulously.

"Why! how many years have we all in the village been unscrewing nuts, and the Lord has been merciful; and you talk of accidents, killing people. If I had carried away a rail or put a log across the

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line, say, then maybe it might have upset the train, but . . . pouf! A nut!"

"But you must understand that the nut holds the rail fast to the sleepers!"

"We understand that. . . . We don't unscrew them all . . . we leave some. . . . We don't do it thoughtlessly . . . we understand. . . ."

Denis yawns and makes the sign of the cross over his mouth.

"Last year the train went off the rails here," says the magistrate. "Now I see why!"

"What do you say, your honour?"

"I am telling you that now I see why the train went off the rails last year. . . . I understand!"

"That's what you are educated people for, to understand, you kind gentlemen. The Lord knows to whom to give understanding. . . . Here you have reasoned how and what, but the watchman, a peasant like ourselves, with no understanding at all, catches one by the collar and hauls one along. . . . You should reason first and then haul me off. It's a saying that a peasant has a peasant's wit. . . . Write down, too, your honour, that he hit me twice—in the jaw and in the chest."

"When your hut was searched they found another nut. . . . At what spot did you unscrew that, and when?"

"You mean the nut which lay under the red box?"

"I don't know where it was lying, only it was found. When did you unscrew it?"

"I didn't unscrew it; Ignashka, the son of one-eyed Semyon, gave it me. I mean the one which was under the box, but the one which was in the sledge in the yard Mitrofan and I unscrewed together."

"What Mitrofan?"

"Mitrofan Petrov. . . . Haven't you heard of him? He makes nets in our village and sells them to the gentry. He needs a lot of those nuts. Reckon a matter of ten for each net."

"Listen. Article 1081 of the Penal Code lays down that every willful damage of the railway line committed when it can expose the traffic on that line to danger, and the guilty party knows that an accident must be caused by it . . . (Do you understand? Knows! And you could not help knowing what this unscrewing would lead to . . .), is liable to penal servitude."

"Of course, you know best. . . . We are ignorant people. . . . What do we understand?"

"You understand all about it! You are lying, shamming!"

"What should I lie for? Ask in the village if you don't believe me. Only a bleak is caught without a weight, and there is no fish worse than a gudgeon, yet even that won't bite without a weight."

"You'd better tell me about the shillisper next," said the magistrate, smiling.

"There are no shillispers in our parts. . . . We cast our line with-

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out a weight on the top of the water with a butterfly; a mullet may be caught that way, though that is not often."

"Come, hold your tongue."

A silence follows. Denis shifts from one foot to the other, looks at the table with the green cloth on it, and blinks his eyes violently as though what was before him was not the cloth but the sun. The magistrate writes rapidly.

"Can I go?" asks Denis after a long silence.

"No. I must take you under guard and send you to prison."

Denis leaves off blinking and, raising his thick eyebrows, looks inquiringly at the magistrate.

"How do you mean, to prison? Your honour! I have no time to spare, I must go to the fair; I must get three roubles from Yegor for some tallow! . . ."

"Hold your tongue; don't interrupt."

"To prison. . . . If there was something to go for, I'd go; but just to go for nothing! What for? I haven't stolen anything, I believe, and I've not been fighting. . . . If you are in doubt about the arrears, your honour, don't believe the elder. . . . You ask the agent . . . he's a regular heathen, the elder, you know."

"Hold your tongue."

"I am holding my tongue, as it is," mutters Denis; "but that the elder has lied over the account, I'll take my oath for it. . . . There are three of us brothers: Kuzma Grigoryev, then Yegor Grigoryev, and me, Denis Grigoryev."

"You are hindering me. . . . Hey, Semyon," cries the magistrate, "take him away!"

"There are three of us brothers," mutters Denis, as two stalwart soldiers take him and lead him out of the room. "A brother is not responsible for a brother. Kuzma does not pay, so you, Denis, must answer for it. . . . Judges indeed! Our master the general is dead—the Kingdom of Heaven be his—or he would have shown you judges. . . . You ought to judge sensibly, not at random. . . . Flog if you like, but flog someone who deserves it, flog with conscience." ●

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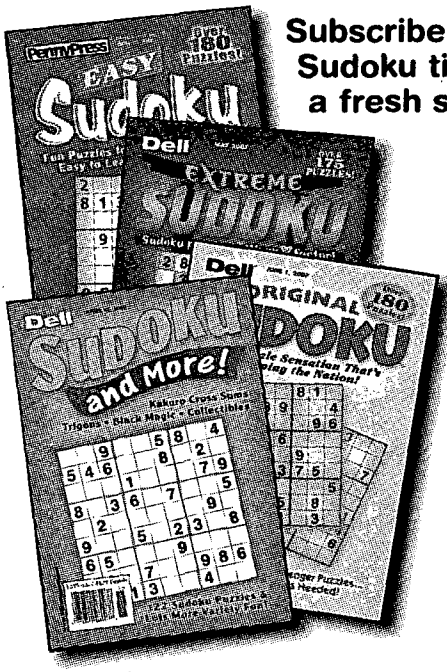

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by Martin Edwards

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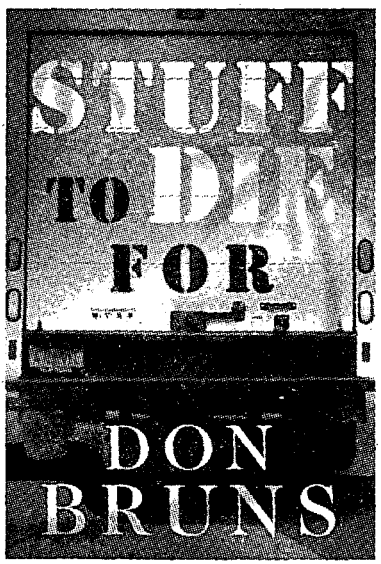

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Murder on the London Eye

by Maria Hudgins

When DI Neville Moody and I got the call, we were a block away from Westminster Bridge on the north side of the Thames. A murdered woman had been discovered in capsule 18 of the British Airways London Eye. Traffic gridlock held us trapped at the foot of Big Ben for a good five minutes before we hit the bridge and saw the big wheel looming through the afternoon haze on our left.

"Is the wheel still running?" Moody asked into his police radio.

I looked, but the Eye turns so slowly that you can't tell, from a moving vehicle, whether it's moving or not.

"They've stopped it," the radio crackled back.

"They're holding everyone who was in that capsule, I assume."

"Apparently she was alone."

Moody flicked his left blinker on and paused before turning into the street beside County Hall. "You're saying it was suicide, then?"

"I have no details, sorry. They said murder."

Moody turned on our flashing lights and drove onto the pedestrian street between County Hall and the base of the Eye's superstructure. He pulled up to the entrance ramp, slowing to let people move out of the way. This was the first time I'd seen the big wheel without a queue winding down the switchbacks of its glass-covered ramp.

A couple of constables pushed back the gathering gawkers, nudging them closer to the ticket office in County Hall. I could see no crime-scene tape. A black-jacketed attendant stood sentry at the bottom of the ramp.

Maria Hudgins is a former high school science teacher who, on retirement, decided to combine two loves, traveling and mysteries, and write mysteries set abroad. She's been to England several times and this locked-room mystery deals with a murder committed in a glass capsule that can be seen from a good part of London. Look for her novel *Death of An Obnoxious Tourist.*

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"Did we beat the SOCOs here?" I hurried round the bonnet of the car to catch up with the long-legged Moody.

A young policewoman hustling up behind us answered. "They're on their way, sir."

Flashing his credentials at the attendant, Moody introduced us both. "Detective Inspector Moody and Sergeant Derek Wilde," he said. "Where are the people who were in the capsule—if that's what you call it—with the deceased?"

"That's just it, sir. There were no other people. She was alone."

"Don't these pods carry about twenty people at a time?"

"Slow day, sir."

I looked up and across the glass roof of the entrance. People were still in the capsules. Panicky people. In a pod on my right, suspended some thirty feet above us, was a woman with a baby in her arms and a toddler pitching a tantrum round her knees. Her frazzled hair told me she was past caring what she looked like. Noses pressed against the curved glass all round, mouths silently begging *Let us out,* kids in urinary crisis bouncing to avoid wetting themselves.

"We need to get those people out of there," I said.

"Right." Moody squinted up at the arc of capsules awaiting disembarkation. The wheel, when it turned, did so clockwise from our vantage point looking westward, so the capsules to our right held people who had already been around, and those on our left were just getting started. "We won't wait for the SOCOs. Sergeant, you and I are going to make a trip round in the capsule with the body. I assume it's the one at the bottom now?"

The attendant turned toward the wheel and nodded. "Yes, sir, we haven't touched anything since we saw that she was . . . past helping."

"Good. I'm going to get a constable over here and I want you to get the names, addresses, telephone numbers, and proof of identity of all the people as they get off. Do they have ticket stubs with them? Right. Collect their stubs, put each person's name on their stub, and put all the information along with the stubs in an envelope. A separate envelope for each capsule. Mark it with the capsule number."

"A lot of these people are probably tourists," I said. "They'll have nothing but a hotel address in London."

"Right you are." Moody paused and dragged the back of his hand across his stubbly jaw line. "The tourists from outside the U.K. will have passports on them—at least they're supposed to. Make photocopies of the first page of their passports and put that in the envelopes, too."

The attendant nodded without blinking, as if he was concentrating to his utmost.

A constable had been summoned. When he'd hustled over to us Moody ran through the instuctions he'd given the attendant and concluded, "Before you let anyone go, ask them if they saw any-

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thing that might help us in our enquiries. Tell them there was a death in capsule eighteen, but be vague about the circumstances. Ask anyone who seems to have seen anything to stay until we make our circuit and let the others go, with the proviso that they keep themselves available for further questions."

"Derek," he said, turning to me, "find us a stack of large envelopes."

I found a sort of office behind a redwood barrier nearby, flashed my ID, and was given a box of Manila envelopes. I handed it to the attendant Moody had put in charge of gathering addresses and headed for the capsule with the open door.

Moody shoved a pair of latex gloves at me as I walked in. The wheel was turning again—ever so slowly. Behind me, the glass door slid closed and locked, and an attendant engaged a second lock from the outside.

In the center of the capsule was a surfboard-shaped wooden bench and on the far end of that bench a huddled form, its grey head tilted to one side. I joined Moody on the far end of the capsule and recoiled sharply when I looked at the woman's face, blotched by hundreds of broken capillaries. One eye was slightly open and a swollen tongue protruded thickly between the lips. Her hands were folded demurely in her lap, as if she were simply waiting for the doctor's assistant to call her name.

"Why hasn't she toppled over?" I asked.

Moody and I knelt on opposite sides of the body. The ligature with which she had obviously been strangled was still round her neck, and under it, a straight-line bruise indicative of murder, not suicide. At the back of the neck and also encircled by the ligature, a sturdy steel rod ran vertically down through the woman's jacket, between two strips of wood on the hatch-patterned bench, and down to the floor. The upper end of the rod terminated in a loop that made a sort of cradle for the back of her head. I had seen similar rods jammed into the ground to position crime-scene tape, the loop at the top forming an eye through which the tape could be threaded.

"She's been propped up!" Moody ran his hand across his face and sat back on his heels. "Why in hell would somebody go to so much trouble to kill this poor lady in a glass bubble you can see from half of London?"

"Someone playing games?"

Moody didn't dignify that with an answer.

A pinkish strip of flesh ran across the back of both her hands; it felt slightly tacky. "I think her hands were taped," I said.

"To keep her from struggling, no doubt."

With a gloved hand, Moody lifted a black cane from the floor. "I suppose she needed this for walking." On one end it had a silver duck head and on the other, a silver tip that appeared to be threaded on the outside. Moody pulled the tip off. "It's hollow. Why would someone want a hollow cane?"

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"To transport contraband—drugs, perhaps?" I said. "Or explosives."

Moody grimaced.

The Eye makes a complete circuit in thirty minutes. By the time Moody and I stood up, we were high above the Thames, Banqueting House, and Westminster. From this position we could see clearly into the capsule immediately ahead of us and across the top of the one following us. Reflections off low clouds and haze kept me from seeing inside that one, but I knew that all the pods following us were empty.

The sturdy glass capsules are designed for maximum visibility. Unlike the chairs on a Ferris wheel, which stay level in response to gravity, they turn within circular mounting rings fixed to the outside of the main rim, affording a 360-degree view. Top to bottom, all but a rectangular section above and the floor itself are transparent. It occurred to me that the opaque floor prevented "up-skirting" of women by occupants of other capsules.

"Forget about the view, and think about which capsules we can see *into*. People who might have seen something going on in here—which capsules could they have been in?" Moody walked slowly around the perimeter of our airborne bubble.

"It's tricky," I said. "It depends on what's reflecting what." We had reached the apex of the ride, 135 meters high. At this point we should have been able to see into the neighboring capsule on each side, but rays from the setting sun, slipping through the city haze, bounced blindingly off one and made the other appear silhouetted against an orange glow. A few seconds later, I could again see clearly the whole interior of the capsule ahead of us.

"You can also see into the capsules on the far side, depending on when you look," Moody said as we began our descent.

I moved over and stood beside him to see where he was pointing.

"The cables and struts are in the way some of the time, but it keeps changing. So if you were watching a specific capsule over there, sometimes you could see it, sometimes you couldn't."

"But people aren't generally watching other capsules, are they?" I said. "They're here for the view."

"Right."

"That attendant said, 'Slow day.' I didn't know it was ever so slow they had people riding around in pods by themselves."

"It's April; not many tourists yet. And it's been a hazy, foggy day."

"It was raining this morning," I said.

"And it's Thursday—not a busy day, I shouldn't think."

"Do you suppose our man—if it was a man—picked today because he knew it would be a slow day?"

"Likely, I'd say. This whole thing was carefully planned."

"He was taking a terrible chance, though. Must have been a nutter to think he could get away with it."

"At the moment, he appears to be doing just that." Moody jammed his hands into his trouser pockets and rocked back on his

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heels. He nodded toward a red structure mounted on a platform past which we were about to descend. A couple of cameras were pointed straight at us.

"Are you telling me they've got photos?"

An automatic announcement poured through a speaker mounted in the housing of one of the two metal leveling bands that belted our capsule: *Ladies and gentlemen, if you would like a photo of yourself on the London Eye, please step to either end of the capsule. There are cameras positioned on both sides of the wheel. You may purchase your photo in the gift shop at the end of your flight.*

"Bloody hell! We can get the gift shop to show us their pictures of capsule eighteen!"

"Not only that," I said. "They'll have photos of everybody in *all* the capsules."

As we approached the bottom, the empty capsule ahead of us swung open and a black-jacketed attendant walked in. He swished a black disc on a long pole—obviously a metal detector—high and low all round the interior.

Moody grabbed the detector-wielding attendant as soon as our door opened. "Do you chaps do that to every capsule, every time around?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then why was this metal cane left lying on the floor?"

"Once they'd seen the body, sir, they probably didn't think they should move anything."

We found the attendant who had stood at the door earlier, seeing that passengers got off safely. She told us that she had been the first to see the body. "When the passenger didn't get up, I said to myself, 'What's wrong?' and I said to her, 'Time to leave, madam,' and when she didn't move—because she was dead, of course—I walked in and by that time the security man with the metal detector was behind me. He took one look at her and said, 'Oh my God!' and ran out and left me there with her all by myself."

"Then what?" I asked.

She was a pretty girl, probably no more than seventeen, and pale in the face from having delivered that whole speech on one lungful of air. "I heard the security man outside yelling, 'We need help!' and 'Stop the wheel!' Then he came back in and knelt down beside the poor woman and more people ran in behind him and it was getting pretty crowded so I left."

The constable and the attendant that Moody had left in charge of names and envelopes were waiting for us on the exit ramp as the SOCO team clattered up the entrance ramp and into capsule 18. "We have one woman who says she remembers looking into that capsule, sir. Only one, the constable reported."

He introduced us to Pauline Newsome, a large, owlish woman I guessed to be in her mid forties. "There was a big group of Japan-

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ese tourists in the capsule below it—number seventeen, they told me; that's how I know which one you're referring to."

"Tell us everything you can remember."

"There was one woman in the capsule below the Japanese group, then the Japanese group, then one woman in the next one above it. That's the one the poor woman . . . that was number eighteen."

"What was she doing?"

"Just sitting there. On the bench."

"Did you see her move at all?"

"No, I don't think so. She was wearing a dark jacket and I think she had grey hair. She was just sitting quietly on the Thames end of the bench."

The attendant interrupted her. "The Japanese party, sir. I remember them. They all wanted to go in the same capsule, even though I told them they could spread out into another one if they wanted to. There was nobody else in line, so it would have been all right."

"But there *was* someone else in line, wasn't there?" Moody said. "The woman who's now *dead.*"

"She may have been behind them at the time, or she may have come up a bit later. I don't remember."

It took us more than an hour to straighten out the envelopes, photos, names, and so on. The photos proved a disappointment, with no one at all visible in capsule 18. As evening settled in, one of the SOCOs bustled into the little office we had taken over. He handed Moody a United States passport. "Looks like our killer forgot to check under the victim's blouse. She was wearing one of those safety pouches they make for passports and cash."

Moody opened the passport and said to me, "Derek, call Heathrow Airport Immigration and find out what they know about Helen Behringer from Stamford, Connecticut."

Immigration collects local address information from tourists before they leave the airport. They told me that Helen Behringer was staying at the Strand Palace Hotel, which, conveniently for us, was a short hop from the Waterloo Bridge.

At the reception desk in the Strand Palace we learned that Ms. Behringer's niece, a Ms. Diane Coles, had already gone to the police station to report her aunt missing.

"Do you know which station?" I asked. "Did she take a taxi or is she walking?"

"We advised her to go to the Charing Cross station. She left with a man who had apparently called for her. He's not one of our guests, but I got the impression that they knew each other well." The man behind the reception desk shifted a stack of papers nervously. "I say, Miss Behringer hasn't come to any harm, has she?"

"I'm afraid she has." Moody drew out his mobile and rang Charing Cross. I heard him tell them to hold Ms. Coles and her com-

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panion until we got there.

En route, Moody looked over at me and said, "Are we on our way to break bad news to relatives or to interview suspects?"

"Huh? Oh, I see." I thought about it for a minute. "Could be either. Or both."

"Exactly. So do we talk to them together or separately? If we're informing relatives of the death of an aunt, the proper thing is to tell them together, so they have each other for support." Moody swung the car around Aldwych Circle to reverse our direction down the Strand. "If we are about to meet our killer, then 'divide and conquer' is much the better plan."

In interviewing suspects, Moody and I make a terrific team, taking advantage of the disconnect between our perceived and actual personas. We never do the "good cop–bad cop" thing because every crook in the world is on to that one. We're much more subtle than that.

Moody's long somber face leads people to think he's a drudge—a bean-counting rule-follower. The sort of cop who'll remember everything that's said, word for word, but who couldn't tell a nun from a junkie if one of them was a man with a needle in his arm. Actually, Neville Moody is an astute judge of human nature.

Now me, on the other hand, people peg me for a bit of a cock-up and I suppose I must look the part, because more than once I've been offered a beer in exchange for letting something slip my mind. In reality, I'm as reliable as they come.

Moody and I conferred as we drove, and by the time we parked at Charing Cross we had a plan.

Ms. Diane Coles's platinum-blond hair was about an inch long all over her head and she looked about forty. She introduced us to her brother, Ted Behringer, a big, athletic-looking bloke who owned and operated a gym near Kensington High Street.

"Could you tell us who Ms. Behringer's next of kin would be?" Moody asked.

Ms. Coles's hand went to her throat. Mr. Behringer grabbed her elbow. "She's . . . she's not . . . Well, Ted and I are her next of kin, I suppose," she answered in an American accent. "She has no children. She never married. Our father and she were brother and sister but he died some fifteen years ago."

Upon hearing that her aunt was indeed dead, Ms. Coles collapsed into the chair offered by the desk sergeant, and Ted Behringer knelt beside her, holding her head against his shoulder. She cried, and he mumbled things I couldn't quite catch.

After a decent interval, Moody asked Diane Coles to go with him to the hospital morgue where we'd been told they'd taken the body, to make a formal identification. I took Ted Behringer into an empty room down the hall.

Behringer had the pigeon-toed walk of an athlete. He wore black

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cross-trainers, dark trousers, and a light-tan thigh-length jacket with a black lining. Black muscle shirt underneath. Thick neck. The sort of man who gets on my nerves.

He grabbed a chair, hiked his trouser legs up, sat down, and plopped one ankle on the opposite knee. "My aunt and my sister are with a group visiting from the U.S.—Red Hatters, they call them. It's my aunt's group, actually, a bunch of older women. Diane is here simply as a companion for my aunt. Aunt Helen—Ms. Behringer—was keen to get Diane away from home for a bit because she's been going through a messy divorce."

"Did Ms. Behringer need a companion? Did she, for instance, have trouble getting around?" I asked.

There was a slight pause before he answered, with a sort of hybrid American/British accent. "Yes, she used a cane and she had to plan her activities in London so as to avoid too much walking."

"What were her plans for today?"

"I thought she was planning to do Buckingham Palace with the rest of the group, but she changed her mind. I'd made the arrangements for all of them, and met them outside the palace at about three or half-past. Something like that. They all gave me their money and I bought their tickets for them. We were given a three forty-five entry time for the Queen's Gallery."

"So you took off the whole day from work, did you?"

"When you own the place, you can do that," he said, with a haughty sniff that I found incredibly irritating.

"Where did you think Ms. Behringer was? Did you discuss it with the others?"

"Diane is sharing a room with her. She told me that Aunt Helen wasn't feeling in top form this morning and had decided against the palace. Thought she might rest in the room for a while and then do a bit of shopping."

"Did everyone else go on the palace tour?"

"I bought sixteen tickets. I think that would be everyone. You'll have to check with Diane to make sure, but I believe she said there were fifteen in the group not counting Aunt Helen. I made sixteen."

"How did they all get from the hotel to the palace?"

"Taxis. Four taxis, I think."

"Did you go in one of the taxis yourself?"

"Drove my own car and met them there."

By the time DI Moody and Diane Coles came back to the station, it was after nine P.M. We let her and Behringer go and we put in a call to the Strand Palace Hotel asking them to advise all of Ms. Behringer's fellow travelers that we needed to interview them and we'd be there early the following morning.

Moody and I compared notes but found no major discrepancies between the two siblings' stories.

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"But she's lying," Moody told me. "She knows a lot more than she told me, and she's not sorry the old girl's dead."

"Behringer's lying too," I said. I was sure of it.

It took most of the morning to interview, separately, each of the fourteen women who were allegedly at Buckingham Palace while Helen Behringer was getting herself murdered on the other side of the Thames. Numerous ticket stubs for the London Eye had told us for certain that the murder had occurred between 16:17 and 16:47. The tour of the palace had been from 15:45 until 17:15, give or take a few minutes on either end. All of the women recalled seeing both Ted Behringer and Diane Coles at various times during the tour, but they had not stayed together as a group.

"I saw Diane in the ladies' room at the Queen's Gallery. That was before we went to the Royal Mews."

"I remember Ted handing us all our tickets before we went in."

"Ted helped me into a taxi when we left, but he and Diane drove off in another car. They didn't go back to the hotel with us."

Those were typical comments.

The autopsy revealed that Helen Behringer had morphine in her system when she died. Enough morphine to have dulled her senses but not enough to have killed her. Death was due, as we already suspected, to asphyxiation by ligature strangulation.

"I don't get it," I told Moody. "If our killer had morphine, why not give the old girl a big dose instead of a small one? Kill her nice and easy and avoid all that hassle?"

"Why indeed?"

It was early afternoon when we got a call from a constable in the incident room back at the station informing us that he'd found another woman who remembered capsule 18. We got her address, near Notting Hill Gate, and dashed over. Her name was Elizabeth Gaskins and she was at home alone.

"My sister-in-law and I took the kids—her one and my two—on the Eye yesterday because it was my son's birthday and we'd let them all stay out of school, for a family lark, you know. I suppose we shouldn't have, but families have so little time together, don't they?"

Moody and I sat in the clean but cramped sitting room of her flat while she made our tea. Photographs on the shelves told me that there was a Mr. Gaskins and that their two children were of different genders.

"I saved our ticket stubs." Mrs. Gaskins set down the tea tray and handed three stubs to Moody.

He looked at them and said, "16:05. That would be when you first got on. So if the ride is thirty minutes, you would have been on the Eye until about . . . 16:35. Yes, that would have overlapped the time when Ms. Behringer was on it."

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"But I didn't know anything about a murder until I got the call from the police. How did you get my name, by the way?"

"You bought the tickets with a credit card."

"Oh yes." Elizabeth Gaskins sipped her tea slowly, as if she was pondering the ease with which she could be identified by the authorities. "But we were ahead of her, you see, so by the time her capsule was opened and they found her, we were probably gone."

"Tell us what you remember."

"Well, I was looking through those cables and poles and things, so I couldn't see any of the capsules on that side for very long, but I remember the capsule full of Asian people. That struck me as odd, because the loads were so different; some of the capsules were completely empty and we five were the only ones in ours. But there must have been twenty people in that one."

"What about adjacent capsules?" Moody prodded her.

"The one below them, I think, had two people in it. They were sitting on the bench. A man and a woman, I believe, but it could have been two women—or two men, I suppose. No, it couldn't have been two men because men would never sit that close together. Not in public, at any rate." She blushed a little. "And in the capsule above the Asian group, there was one woman."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. Because I wondered why a woman—she looked fairly elderly, kind of hunch-shouldered—would go on a thing like that by herself."

"You're positive there was no one else in the capsule with her?"

"Absolutely. I took a good look, at least a couple of times, because I just wondered about her, you know?"

Since the Gaskins's flat was near the Kensington address of Ted Behringer's gym, we decided to pay him a quick visit. We entered the gym from a side door adjacent to a parking lot where we had to navigate around a long row of bicycles chained in such a way as to almost completely block the door. Inside, the most striking thing about Behringer's Gym was what we didn't see: much equipment. What I saw plenty of was empty space—pressure marks on the green carpet where equipment had once been. Ted stood up and swiped a towel across the seat of a leg press when he saw us coming.

Moody asked him a few unimportant questions to start, then, "We can't find anyone else who's ever seen Ms. Behringer with a cane. Didn't you tell us she had trouble walking? Used a cane?"

Behringer didn't miss a beat. "She didn't like people to see her with it. I doubt she'd have let anyone but Diane and me know."

Around 5:30, Moody and I dropped into the Sherlock Holmes Pub on Northumberland to kill time while the home-bound traffic sorted itself out. Over the course of the day our team had logged, conservatively, fifty transatlantic phone calls but we had nailed down the

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motive for Helen Behringer's murder. Money. No surprise there. It seemed that Ms. Behringer was worth about ten million or so in real estate, stocks, cash, and life insurance. Ted Behringer was listed as beneficiary of the relatively new million-dollar life-insurance policy, and he and his sister Diane stood to jointly inherit everything else.

Behringer's gym was mere weeks away from bankruptcy and foreclosure, and Ted personally was flat broke. Diane Coles had been left with a big mortgage and a boatload of credit-card debt by a husband with a gambling problem.

"You asked me why he took all the trouble to strangle her when he could have just given her a bigger dose of morphine and had done with it. Think about the insurance policy." Moody slid a pint of Guinness across the table to me. "An overdose of morphine could be suicide. Or accident. Or murder." He took a long pull on his beer. "In fact, in lieu of a suicide note, it's often hard to tell the difference between suicide and accident. Our man—and I'm convinced that it *was* our man Ted, since Helen Behringer outweighed Diane Coles by three stone, at least—had to make it clear that it was murder. A ruling of suicide would have ruined it. He couldn't take that chance."

"Oh, right! Insurance policies often won't pay off for suicide. But still, that's only about a million out of a total of ten million or so."

"He's a greedy bugger, what?"

"So Behringer and his sister needed to do for the lady before the gym went into foreclosure and while the group was in London, because Ms. Coles couldn't have pulled it off by herself. And it had to be done in such a way that the time could be nailed down precisely."

"Precisely," Moody said.

"At a time for which Coles and Behringer both had alibis."

I foolishly offered to share our saucer-sized table with a couple of young women in very high heels, then found there was insufficient room for us all. Moody and I stood to finish our pints, wedged in so tightly against other patrons we had to give fair warning all round before we could raise our glasses to our mouths.

Giving that up, we left and walked down two blocks to the Embankment, turning south along the river. From here, we had a perfect view of the London Eye, turning now as if nothing had ever happened. I located a bench far enough from a line of waiting tour coaches to escape the worst of the diesel exhaust. We sat.

"So we know who, we know when, we know why, we know where. We only need to know *how.*" Moody stretched his legs straight out and jammed his hands into his trouser pockets, his long face looking even longer than usual. "How did he get from Buckingham Palace to the London Eye, take his aunt for a little ride, kill her, and escape without anyone seeing him?"

"Did you notice that none of the ladies at the palace were sure they actually saw Ted Behringer between the time he bought the tickets and when he saw them off in their cabs?" I asked.

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"Problem is, would he have had time to get in his car, drive across the river to the Eye, buy a ticket, meet up with his aunt, and be inside the capsule by four-seventeen? It's not far, but think about the traffic around Westminster at four o'clock. We were caught in it ourselves yesterday."

I reminded him of the gaggle of bicycles we'd recently seen at Behringer's Gym. "He could have done it on a bicycle."

"Brilliant!" Moody clapped me on the knee. "On a bike, he could have done it."

"We still have our original problem, though," I said. "Pauline Newsome saw only one person in capsule eighteen, the one right above the Japanese group, and Elizabeth Gaskins confirmed it."

"Number eighteen."

"Yes." I stared at the wheel and realized that it was turning in the same direction as yesterday, that is, counter-clockwise from where we sat on the north bank of the river. It's called the north bank even though the Thames makes a sharp turn and runs south to north at that point, and we were actually sitting on the western side. But yesterday, looking at it from the other side, it had seemed to go clockwise. I pictured Pauline Newsome in her capsule several steps behind No. 18. She would have been on the southern side while number 18 was descending on the northern side. But Elizabeth Gaskins had got on the Eye earlier. She would have been nearing the end of her ride on the northern side as number 18 was rising in the south.

"No!"

Moody jumped.

"No, it wasn't number eighteen that Elizabeth Gaskins saw above the Japanese group; when she saw it, eighteen would have been *below* them. Then, on the descending side, when Pauline Newsome saw it, eighteen would have been *above* them!" I rotated my hands to show what I meant.

"That's it. That has to be it." Moody sat hunched forward and stared at the wheel for a long time. "That coat Behringer was wearing last night. It was reversible, wasn't it?"

"It was light-colored with a dark lining. Could have been reversible."

"It *was* reversible. So how could Behringer have sneaked out of that capsule without anyone seeing him?"

I shrugged.

"By turning into a security man. Security were all wearing black jackets, weren't they? He could have made himself hard to see if he stood close to one of those strips inside the stabilizing bands, reversed his coat quickly when the girl came in to see why Helen Behringer wasn't moving, and suddenly there he is, with a metal detector, pretending to search for bombs."

"Where did he get the metal detector?"

"The cane, of course. The cane."

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Ted Behringer made a couple of mistakes. First, he returned the black 2kg weight to the weight rack in his gym without bothering to remove the threaded insert in the hole which had enabled him to screw it to the bottom of the cane to give the appearance of a metal detector. The rod that had kept the poor woman's body propped up was found, once we pulled off the loop on one end, to precisely fit inside the hollow cane. That explained how he got the metal rod in to begin with; the cane itself would have set off the alarm at the entrance, but aroused no suspicion.

His second mistake? He threw his ticket stub for the London Eye—flight time: 16:17—into his own trash can.●

THE JURY BOX (continued from p. 28)

*** Eric Berlin: *The Puzzling World of Winston Breen,* Putnam, $16.99. The titular 12-year-old (no relation to this reviewer) didn't realize the ornate wooden box he gave his younger sister for her birthday had a puzzle concealed in its secret compartment, or that he'd have to join with a variety of sometimes threatening grown-ups to figure out its meaning. The gradually revealed central problem and several unrelated puzzles scattered through the book are well calibrated for readers eight and up. This well-written, well-plotted, and well-peopled adventure, including a suspenseful action climax, should appeal to a wide audience of young readers, though they may grow up to prefer EQ and the Golden Age classicists to most of the current adult mystery crop.

** Shelley Freydont: *The Sudoku Murder,* Carroll & Graf, $24.95. Think-tank mathematician Katie McDonald returns to her New Hampshire hometown at the urgent request of Professor P.T. Avondale, an old mentor whose puzzle museum was her childhood refuge. When the professor is murdered, an unfinished sudoku proves a key clue. Though the novel falls short of its early promise and has the common fault of excessive padding and repetition, the characters and small-town background have their charms.

** Kaye Morgan: *Death by Sudoku,* Berkley, $6.99. A less distinguished mystery holds greater interest for sudoku buffs. Liza Kelly, Hollywood P.R. woman turned newspaper sudoku columnist, looks into the murder of a puzzle-obsessed actor who bested her in an Orange County, California, tournament. Five original sudokus and their solutions are included, plus knowledgeable how-to instruction. Solvers who have become arrogant in their success with newspaper sudokus will be humbled by the tournament-level example. (Morgan is the pseudonym of Bill McCay, co-author of the Raven League juvenile Sherlock Holmes pastiches.)

*** Max Allan Collins: *A Killing in Comics,* illustrations

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by Terry Beatty, Berkley, $14. Among the suspects in the bizarre murder of a comic-book publisher in 1948 New York are fictional characters inspired by the creators of Superman and Batman. Period-style drawings by Beatty, Collins's collaborator on the *Ms. Tree* comics, appear on the cover, chapter headings, and a Queenian challenge to the reader prior to the denouement. In homage to Rex Stout, newspaper syndicate troubleshooter Jack Starr provides Goodwin-esque narrative, while his employer/stepmother, ex-striptease artist Maggie Starr, is Wolfean in her self-confidence, intelligence, and stage presence if nothing else. Though not quite in a class with the author's Nate Heller books or the *Road to Perdition* series, this novel will delight fans of comics and Golden Age detection.

** Hailey Lind: *Brush with Death,* Signet, $6.99. In her third adventure, art restorer Annie Kincaid investigates the claim of a graduate student that the alleged reproduction of Raphael's *La Fornarina* hanging in an Oakland columbarium is actually the original. This is very much the mixture as before, with chapter epigraphs in which Annie's forger grandfather replies to quotations from real-life artists. The slowly unfolding plot includes touristy visits to the Getty Center and San Francisco's Fisherman's Wharf. The lively and humorous first-person style does its best to hold reader impatience at bay until the slapstick climax.

If you're looking for holiday gifts, Charles Ardai's *The Good-Neighbor Policy: A Double-Cross in Double Dactyls* (Midsummer Nights Press, $6.95) is an offbeat stocking stuffer (literally, it's small enough): a clever and remarkably successful detective poem (66 verses in 22 pages) by the novelist, *EQMM* contributor, and editor/publisher of the Hard Case Crime paperback line.

The publishers of Akashic Books seem determined to spotlight every major American city and many foreign ones in their noir series of original anthologies, now up to 15 volumes with at least another dozen projected. The two most recent additions ($15.95 each) are *Los Angeles Noir,* edited by Denise Hamilton, and *Bronx Noir,* edited by S.J. Rozan. On the basis of my sampling, the East Coast collection may have a slight edge, but both offer a variety of crime stories with a sharp sense of place. *Bronx* has strong entries in Joanne Dobson's post-WWII era "Hey, Girlie," Ed Dee's early-1960s "Ernie K.'s Gelding," and especially Thomas Adcock's pointedly present-day "You Want I Should Whack Monkey Boy?" *L.A.* leads off with "Mulholland Dive," Michael Connelly's semi-procedural tale of an auto accident reconstructionist, and includes a fine James M. Cain-style study in conscience and criminality, "Roger Crumbler Considered His Shave" by Gary Phillips. Major surprise is one of the few real detective stories in either book: the very funny (if not truly noirish) Beverly Hills tale "Morocco Junction 90210" by L.A. *Times* columnist Patt Morrison. ●

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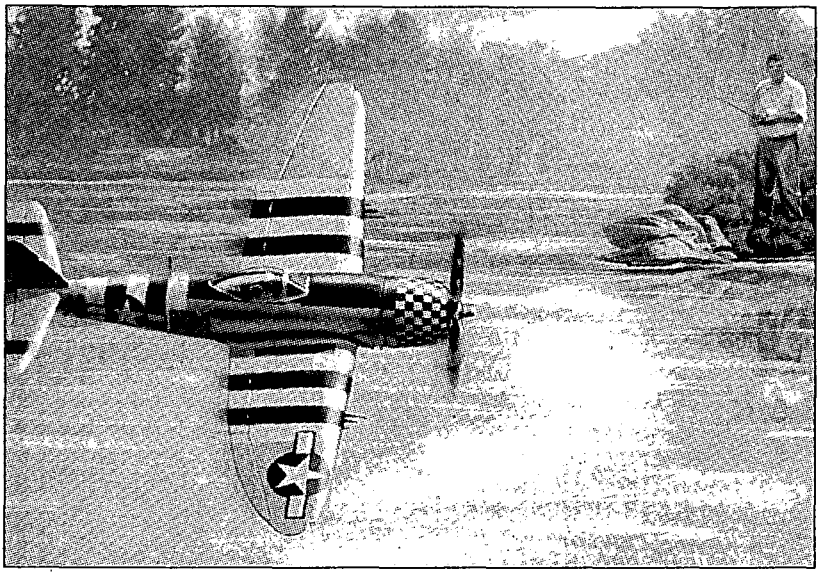

Art by Mark Evans

SNOWBIRD

by Michael Bracken and Tom Sweeney

The P-47 Thunderbolt raced across Parker Lake thirty feet above the water. The insect-like drone of its engine, seemingly magnified by the surface of the water, echoed off the bare hills of the far shore. Dave Fogelman nudged the radio controller with his thumb and the plane dipped lower, then continued to drop even after he released the altitude lever.

He quickly jerked back the stick, feathered out the throttle, and lifted the quarter-scale model to a safer altitude. The plane wobbled, then steadied, but Fogelman shook his head. It still wasn't right.

The plane passed in front of the sun and he squinted at the sudden glare. It had snowed in Detroit last week, but here in the Texas Hill Country, where he'd retired, the October sun kept the temperature blisteringly close to three digits.

The scale-model plane drifted to the south, keeping Fogelman constantly working the controls to keep it steady. The little plane fought back, as if trying to escape the same way its predecessor had. He'd named his first plane *Elise,* after his former fiancée. That plane had escaped his control and flown off over the hills. He'd spent a week looking, but never found a trace of it. Much like the real Elise.

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Fogelman hadn't named this plane.

As he swung the model in its wide arc to the landing strip, a plume of dust about a half-mile down the flat valley caught his eye. A car had turned off the paved road and was coming his way. Rafael, he hoped, with some information. Fogelman didn't need to supplement his retirement income with his private-investigation service, but he needed to remain active. He refused to be one of those cops who ate his pistol because he couldn't adjust to retirement.

This collaboration between Michael Bracken, author of hundreds of works of short fiction, and Tom Sweeney, a former nominee for the PWA's Shamus award, is set in Mr. Bracken's home state of Texas. Mr. Bracken is also the editor of eight crime-fiction anthologies. His editorial instincts must have been at work here, for the collaboration is seamless. ¶

The car threaded its way up the private drive, swerving with care around the deep ruts Fogelman's truck had dug out during last spring's rains. Not Rafael at the wheel, then.

Fogelman frowned. He did get the occasional snowbird stopping by his shop, wanting to fly or talk flying, but they rarely ignored the No Trespassing sign to come directly onto his flying strip. In a moment the car resolved itself into the brown and white markings of the county sheriff. Shit.

Fogelman had the radio-controlled plane on the ground and idling by the time Sheriff Ezekiel Parker rolled his patrol car to a stop on the grass strip next to Fogelman's extended-cab dualie. Parker grabbed a tan file folder off the seat beside him and hefted his bulk out of the car. Fogelman extended a hand, and after a slight hesitation Parker shook it. Whatever his attitude toward Fogelman, his grip remained firm enough.

Parker pulled off his hat and wiped his eyes with his forearm, leaving a damp spot on his uniform sleeve. "Hot for October," he said. "But I guess that's why you snowbirds come down here, eh?"

Six years after Fogelman had cleared a patch of mesquite and prickly pear cactus and set up his doublewide mobile home, the sheriff still treated him as an outsider. Fogelman shrugged. Better that way.

Parker stared across the lake, silent. He might have seen something or he might be playing cop games. Without moving his gaze, he handed the file folder sideways to Fogelman.

Fogelman opened it and thumbed through a series of crime-scene photographs. Years of experience working with photos like these gave him a living view of the crime scene: an almost-new motor home, Good Sam sticker in the rear window, surrounded by other motor homes with Good Sam stickers; the motor home's open door

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with the bloody handprint beside it; the inside of the motor home and the trail of blood stretching down the floor from the rear bedroom. He placed the folder on the hood of his truck and joined Parker in studying the opposite shore of the lake.

Finally Parker turned. "No body and no witnesses. No one heard a thing," he said.

"Couldn't have gone too far," Fogelman said, "losing blood like that. Any idea who it could be?"

"Found his wallet on the RV's dash. Vladimir Strenko. Ring any bells?"

Fogelman kept his cop face on, but couldn't control his rising pulse. He shook his head, watching the sheriff closely.

"Found this in his wallet." Parker held a plastic evidence baggie and laid it on the truck's hood next to the photographs. Inside the clear baggie, Dave Fogelman's name and a six-digit number had been written on a corner torn from a sheet of lined notebook paper. "Know what the number is?"

He certainly did. The question was, did Parker? Fogelman considered speaking up, but one thing he'd learned in twenty-five years as a cop was that volunteering information rarely worked in a suspect's favor. Not that Fogelman considered himself a suspect yet, but he might be when Parker learned the six-digit number had been his Detroit PD badge number. "Could be anything," he said.

Parker nodded as if satisfied. He asked, "You working anything now?"

"Hermie thinks someone's taking his RVs off the lot for joyrides," Fogelman said. Herman Wonders operated Wonder RVs a few miles north of San Antonio. He lived in Lakeview Terrace, a new development carved out of the scrubby forest a couple of miles south of Fogelman's shop. Sometimes he flew his quarter-scale Piper alongside Fogelman's P-47. "Claims the mileage is wrong on a couple of his rigs. In fact," Fogelman added, "when I saw you pull off the road, I thought it might be Rafael bringing me information about Hermie's problem."

"Rafael? What the hell would that no-load know?" Like most in this region, Parker was quick to discount anything said or done by a Mexican, just as a Detroit cop would put little credence in a Menominee witness from the Upper Peninsula.

"His brother's a shrimper out of Port Aransas," Fogelman explained. "Hermie said two of the RVs had shrimp tails on the passenger-side floor, and the extra miles on them were just about enough to get to the coast and back."

"Tracking down shrimp-eating joyriders seems like a waste of your many talents."

Fogelman glanced sharply at Parker. The sheriff's face remained guileless, but who could tell? Barry Gorman had seemed guileless, too.

Fogelman turned and stepped around to the back of his truck.

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The hell with Parker. The hell with him, his cousin, and the whole state of Texas. Whatever made Fogelman think he could put down roots here or anyplace else?

He popped open the custom cap and removed a small canvas tool bag. It had been seven years since he'd crossed paths with Vladimir "Vlad the Impaler" Strenko on a bitterly cold Detroit winter night. Strenko had left him bleeding and shivering on the floor of an abandoned warehouse. Fogelman lived, but his life had fallen apart: Elise disappeared without saying a word, his partner quit the force without saying goodbye.

Fogelman shook his head to clear the memory and began removing the left wing of the P-47.

"We ran the prints. They're Strenko's," the sheriff said from behind him. "He's got a jacket longer than my arm."

A winter jacket, they'd called it back in Detroit, because it was so long. Fogelman ignored him and carefully laid the left wing on the ground and started to remove the right.

"Key suspect in seven murders. Arrested only once. No convictions." The sheriff paused as if waiting for Fogelman to comment. "Not a peep out of him for years. Then he shows up here. His wallet. His fingerprints. Your name."

Fogelman carried the fuselage to the back of his truck and slid it into the center of three padded compartments. The two wings followed. Still Parker waited. Did he know about Strenko? Why didn't Parker mention that Strenko's rap sheet came from Detroit? What kind of game was he playing?

Fogelman's own file would certainly mention Strenko, but what would be in Strenko's file? The worst thing Fogelman could do now would be to ask questions or try to explain anything. He closed the truck cap and checked his watch. Rafael was late, and Fogelman wanted to shower and change before picking up Nettie. "We done?"

"Nope. Need you to come look at the RV."

Fogelman raised an eyebrow. After he'd started dating Parker's cousin Nettie, he and Parker had sometimes exchanged cop talk, usually when Parker happened to drop by Nettie's when Fogelman was there. But Parker had never asked Fogelman to ride anywhere on official business. Was he seriously looking for help or trying to trap him?

Fogelman asked, "For what?"

"Just another pair of eyes."

Right, Fogelman thought, but he fired up his dualie and followed Parker's dust cloud toward the main road.

The impound lot comprised a fenced-in corner of Pablo's Salvage Yard that the county rented at a reduced rate, but rarely needed. The motor home was the sole vehicle in the lot, covered with a cheap blue tarp. Parker unlocked the gate and Fogelman followed him in on foot. Parker slipped the tarpaulin tie-downs from pegs driven into the hard-packed clay and the two of them flipped the

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tarp back over the roof.

"Keeps the rain from washing the blood off," explained Parker.

Fogelman grunted, eyes on the dark red streak on the side of the RV, about eye level and a few inches to the left of the door. At the top of the streak was a large handprint.

Fogelman was surprised at how quickly he reverted to cop. The bloody print wasn't a sad reminder of someone's life, but a puzzle to be solved. "Someone had blood all over his hands," he said to Parker. "He leaned against the trailer, pushed against it hard. His hand slipped up to here." Fogelman held his own hand even with the dried handprint. He had to stand on his toes to reach it.

Parker grunted.

"Yeah," said Fogelman. "If this guy was standing on the ground when he made these marks, he is one tall dude." Strenko was a giant, six feet, eight inches tall and weighing well over three hundred pounds. Parker had Strenko's file—he must know this.

Parker made a show of eyeing the height of the handprint. "About six-eight, I make it, assuming that he first pressed his hand against the RV at shoulder level. I figure he tried to escape, but someone pulled him back inside. He leaned against the door, but the other guy was stronger or Strenko was about done in from loss of blood."

Fogelman stepped into the trailer, careful not to step on the dried bloodstains, and whistled at the mess inside, instantly forgetting Parker's dumb act about Strenko's height. Contents of the built-in cabinets were strewn across the floor, something that hadn't been apparent from the pictures. The built-in dinette was smashed, ripped from the wall and turned on its back. A closet door hung from one hinge. "Someone tossed this place," he said. "Tossed it good."

Parker climbed inside. "Wallet with your name was up front there, on the dash."

Fogelman squeezed past Parker. The glove compartment hung open and magazines littered the floor next to an empty rack. Fogelman ran his hands over the plush captain's chairs. Neither had been sliced open. "So who discovered the blood?" Fogelman asked.

"Guy in the next coach. He and Strenko apparently had coffee together day before yesterday, seemed to hit it off well. About seven yesterday morning, he pulls on a robe and walks over to Strenko's, sees the open door and the blood, and hightails it to a pay phone to call us."

"Where's he now?"

"Wherever snowbirds go," Sheriff Parker said.

"What? You lost him?"

Parker stiffened. "We'll find him. Got a man on it running his plate number by campgrounds."

"So what did you want me for?"

"Thought you might know something more than I do. Like why your name was in Strenko's wallet and what the killer might have

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been looking for."

That was a place Fogelman had no desire to go. "In Detroit we'd put out an APB on the witness," he said. "Haul his ass in and not waste time calling campgrounds." Fogelman shook his head, then looked back into the RV cab. After a moment, he continued, "Either the guy found what he wanted before he finished searching the front, or whatever he was looking for was big, too big to be hidden in the seats." Fogelman stepped to the ground outside.

Parker followed Fogelman out of the RV and locked it. "Check with me before leaving the county," he said.

Fogelman looked up sharply. Did Parker know something or not? Should Fogelman have told about his badge number? Annoyed at himself, at Parker, at having someone tell him to stick around, he shot back, "You can't find me, call your cousin."

Parker gave him a curt nod and stepped inside the salvage yard's office, leaving Fogelman to walk out to his truck alone.

Nettie Travis stood behind the screen door as Fogelman pulled his truck to the curb and killed the engine. She stared out at him, then disappeared into the house as he made his way up the walk to the porch.

Fogelman rapped on the wooden screen door, then pulled the door open when she didn't respond.

"The movie started twenty minutes ago," she said when he found her standing at the kitchen sink, her back to him.

"We can catch the next show."

"That isn't the point."

He crossed the kitchen and placed one hand on her shoulder. She shrugged it off.

"Parker had something to show me," Fogelman explained. "One of the snowbirds got himself into some trouble. Sheriff thought I might know something about it."

Nettie turned. "Why you?"

Fogelman explained about the blood and the note.

When he finished, she said, "You told me you'd left all that behind."

"I did. Maybe it followed me. Maybe it's coincidence."

"I don't want to get a phone call telling me you're hurt."

"You won't." Fogelman had moved from Detroit to forget the people who had forgotten him—the partner who had retired from the force during his hospital stay, the girlfriend who hadn't bothered to visit or even say goodbye. He'd spent a month alone in that hospital bed waiting for someone—anyone—who meant something to him to show up. On his release, Fogelman had returned to his empty apartment, then to desk duty, where he heard an endless string of less-than-comforting platitudes from his fellow detectives. After his injury, nothing had been the same, and Fogelman had no desire to relive his last year in Detroit. "I promise, you won't."

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"I—"

Fogelman placed one finger against her lips. "You don't have to say it. I know. I'll be careful."

Rafael sat at Meader's Bait & Beer nursing a Shiner Bock. When Fogelman slipped onto the stool next to him, Rafael said, "Missed you yesterday."

"Sorry," Fogelman said. "Parker wanted to play show-and-tell. What've you got for me?"

"They ain't running seafood up from the coast, that's for sure." Rafael paused to sip at his beer. "My brother's nosed around the docks. Guy in an RV is buying something, but it ain't shrimp."

"Don't get cute. I'm not in the mood."

"You want my help or not?"

Fogelman stared.

"Coke. They're bringing coke in on the shrimp boats. Put it in a shrimp sack and give it to this big dude in an RV, like he bought a bag of shrimp."

"Same guy all the time? Same RV?"

"Same guy. I dunno about the RV. There's so freakin' many of 'em, who'd notice?"

Fogelman thought about the RV Parker had shown him earlier that day, then slid a hundred across the bar. "Got anything else?"

Rafael put his fingertips on the bill. "Naw, couldn't get too much off those guys. That Russian keeps 'em busy, works their asses off."

"Russian?" Fogelman's head jerked up. "Taller than me, big shoulders, huge gut?"

"Naw, little guy. Fat, though. The guy in the RV is the big dude. *Desgraciado,* that one. My brother's a mean son of a bitch, and he's scared shitless of this guy."

A commotion behind them caused both to turn. Parker stood in the doorway, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the dim lighting of the bar.

Fogelman turned back to the bar. The empty Shiner Bock was pushed to the back edge of the bar and the hundred had disappeared.

Rafael stood to leave. "Later, *amigo,*" he said.

Parker took the seat just vacated and waved off the bartender. "Found him," he said. "Up in Waco, at the Heart of Texas Fair and Rodeo grounds. The locals have him wrapped up. I'll drive up in the morning and talk to him."

"Mind if I tag along?"

"Suit yourself."

The sheriff wheeled through Hill Country back roads that Fogelman had never seen, evidently a shortcut to the Interstate. He braked several times to avoid deer crossing the road and Fogelman again marveled at the amount of wildlife this apparently barren land could support. Barren at least compared to Michigan.

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Even in heavily populated southern Michigan, you were never far from forest, thick with evergreens and white birches.

Fogelman wondered again if he should tell Parker about the badge number. Parker was sure to find out eventually, and although it was true that a suspect didn't help himself by volunteering information, the quickest way to annoy a cop was to withhold information because the cop hadn't framed the question just so. And Parker wasn't a man to annoy without good reason.

Fogelman watched the scrubby trees slide past his window and wondered if he had good reason, if he ought to be afraid of Parker. He searched for the right way to ask without arousing suspicion, but a half-hour later the sheriff's vehicle reached I-35, and Fogelman still hadn't found it. He smiled. For the first time in his life he felt sympathy for those he had interrogated.

Another hour passed in silence, then the sheriff turned off I-35 onto New Road and followed it through Waco to Bosque Boulevard. A left turn on Bosque brought them to the Heart of Texas Fair and Rodeo grounds, now overflowing with RVs.

The sheriff drove between the lines of trailers and motor homes, scanning each. Parker didn't say what he was looking for and Fogelman didn't ask, though he wondered again if it was a good idea to have asked to come along.

Parker wheeled in next to a blue and green motor home several feet longer than the one with the bloody handprint. A short, slightly rounded middle-aged man with a toothbrush moustache opened the door immediately and waved them inside.

The three of them sat at what would be the kitchen table. Fogelman noted that rather than the straight-back booth-bench seats he imagined all RVs had, this one had a freestanding table and set of chairs. In the next room he saw a plush aqua-colored sofa and easy chair. The RV might be slightly smaller than Fogelman's mobile home, but it was much better appointed. And, he thought, it had the advantage of being truly mobile. When life turned sour, one had merely to drive somewhere new and begin again with a fresh slate. In a motor home this nice, one could even pretend it was possible. Fogelman had only one move in him after retirement—to Texas, a place as far from Detroit in distance, weather, and attitude as he could get.

Eric Booker pushed his glasses up his nose using the tip of his index finger. "Look," he said. "I told you everything I know when you talked to me the other day."

"Tell me again," Parker said. He jerked his thumb toward Fogelman. "My friend here needs to hear it."

Booker glanced from one man to the other. "I'm not in trouble, am I?"

Fogelman leaned forward. "Not yet."

Booker took a quick swallow from his iced tea. "Like I said, me and the guy driving that RV hit it off real good the day before. We talked

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sports mostly. Basketball. He's a Pistons fan, I favor the Lakers."

"Describe the guy for us."

"Tall. Very tall and skinny. I thought he might have played basketball, but he said he never did."

"He have an accent?" Parker asked.

"Yeah, a funny one."

"Russian?"

"Yeah, I guess. I don't know."

Parker looked at Fogelman. "So we proved it was Strenko. Happy?"

Fogelman stared at Booker. "What aren't you telling us?"

Booker shifted his eyes between Parker and Fogelman. "He said not to say anything. That I'd be sorry."

Parker slammed his fist onto the table. "You'll be damned sorrier if you ever hold out on me again. Who said not to say anything?"

Booker jumped. "The night before . . . you know . . . the blood. I knocked on the trailer and this guy opened the door and pulled me in. Asked me all about who lived in the trailer. Said he'd kill me if I said anything to anyone."

"What'd he look like? How old was he?" Parker leaned forward and Booker shrank back.

"About my age—mid forties—athletic. 'Bout six inches taller than me."

"And you are?"

"Five seven and a half."

"Yeah?"

"And heavy. Not fat, you know. Stout. He weighed two-fifty, I'll bet, but muscle weight, you know."

Fogelman said, "Hair?"

"Full head of it, not like me. I been losing hair since I turned twenty. His was black, mostly. Bit of gray at the temples. Wore it pushed back. Kind of greasy—like maybe he hadn't washed it for a few days."

"Scars? Tattoos?"

"None that I saw. Except one eyebrow was turned up funny."

"Funny?"

"Yeah, looked like there was a scar that ran along his eyebrow, like a boxer gets. You know? Split open and bleeds during a fight?"

Parker made a few notes in his pad. "Eyeglasses?" he asked.

"No."

"Jewelry?"

Booker thought for a moment. "None that I remember."

"What about a wedding ring?"

Booker paused again. "No," he said. "I don't think so."

Parker and Fogelman spent the next hour with Booker, asking and re-asking the same questions, trying to elicit additional information, but learned little else.

In Parker's car, Fogelman waited for Parker to ask him about the man Booker had described.

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Parker didn't ask, though, and that was fine with Fogelman. Until he figured out what was going on, he wasn't ready to admit that Booker had described Barry Gorman—his former partner—to a T. Even had the eyebrow scar right.

The sun was setting by the time Fogelman retrieved his dualie at the sheriff's office. He considered stopping at Nettie's while he was still in town, then decided against dropping in unannounced. Accustomed to being in control, Fogelman felt less capable and more exposed with each development in the case.

He felt a noose was tightening around him, constricting his movements. Vladimir Strenko, Barry Gorman. What were they both doing in Texas? Were they together? And how did he fit into the picture? Fogelman surprised himself by wondering if Elise was in Texas, also. He thought he'd buried that relationship a long time ago.

Shit. He *had* buried that relationship. Just because Strenko left some blood in the area was no reason to lose objectivity. Booker described someone who resembled Barry Gorman, right down to the scar under his eyebrow. But probably thousands fit the general description, and there must be plenty of people with scars under their eyebrows. Probably everyone who'd ever boxed. He turned off the state road onto the winding county road leading to his doublewide.

Even before Fogelman turned into his driveway, he could see his front door standing open. He reached under the seat and unholstered a .38 that he'd carried as a throw-down, but never used, during his last few years on the Detroit police force. He didn't bother sneaking up to the porch, as anyone inside would have seen his headlights long before he'd stopped the truck.

A half-dozen steps took him from the truck to the mobile home, then up three concrete steps and inside. He snapped on lights as he moved through the house, lowering his gun only when he felt confident his visitors had left.

He walked through the house again, much more slowly. No hyped-up junkie on a snatch-and-grab had visited his place. His trailer had been professionally searched, and everything returned to its proper place. Whoever had broken in knew their job. Only the smallest details gave them away. An end-table lamp placed just out of arm's reach of his reading chair, the salt and pepper shakers in the wrong place on the sideboard, and his computer disks badly missorted. Still, it was a good job, and Fogelman might never have known he'd had a visitor if his front door hadn't failed to latch properly.

Fogelman dialed the sheriff's office. When Parker came on the line, Fogelman said, "I've been tossed."

"What'd they get?"

"Nothing," Fogelman said. "Nothing obvious."

"You want me to send a car?"

Fogelman considered the offer. "Waste of time," he finally said. "These guys were pros. If they didn't take anything, they probably

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didn't leave anything behind either."

All of a sudden, Fogelman didn't want to be alone. He thought of Elise, wondered where she was, and felt guilty that he wanted to be with Nettie tonight. The guilt didn't stop him, though, and he dialed Nettie's number from memory.

"Ezekiel stopped by the school today and asked about you," Nettie said. "Wanted to know what your intentions were."

"Huh?"

"He's afraid of you, you know."

Fogelman looked up. "Who is?"

"My cousin. Who were we just talking about?"

"Sheriff Parker isn't afraid of anyone, especially not an over-the-hill snowbird."

"You've been here six years. Everyone knows you. You're hardly a snowbird."

"Tell that to your cousin."

Nettie didn't respond, and the silence grew between them. A knot grew in Fogelman's stomach. Something bad was happening, and he didn't know why or how to stop it. He did know that if he didn't say something quickly, they'd cross a line they might not be able to cross back over. At least not together.

But so what? he thought. So our relationship tanks tonight. It'll just speed up the inevitable.

Finally Nettie turned back to the kitchen. Fogelman didn't intend to say anything, but the word flew out. "Nettie?"

She turned and dabbed her eyes with her apron. "He's afraid you'll take his job."

"What? Me? Run for sheriff? Who'd vote for me? Why would I even run?"

"Everyone likes you. Rafael and his crowd all but worship you. You could win."

"I don't want his stupid job."

Nettie threw the potholders at him. "Oh, fine. That should make him feel so much better." She stood trembling, arms straight down by her side, hands clenched into tiny fists. "You bastard!"

Fogelman jumped off the couch and grabbed her by the arms, pulling her to his chest. "Nettie, I—"

She started to sob then, her shoulders tight in his grip. He stroked her hair. "Nettie, Parker . . . your cousin . . . Ezekiel—" the name came off his tongue like the grinding of gears. Fogelman couldn't even think of him by his first name. He'd always be Parker—just like Parker would never call him Dave.

"He's a country sheriff. You were a homicide detective in Detroit. He looks up to you."

"News to me."

"Do you know how he found Eric Booker? He put out an APB just

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like you suggested. In four hours Booker'd been found. Why do you think he invites you along? Why do you think he asks you all those questions?"

"Mostly to toy with me, I guess. In this case, he looks at me like a suspect."

Nettie looked up, kissed his chin. "That's where you're so wrong."

Fogelman closed his eyes to kiss her, but before their lips met, Nettie's door burst open. Startled, they turned to see Ezekiel Parker framed in the doorway, hands on hips. "You carrying?" he said.

Fogelman let go of Nettie and took a step towards Parker. "Not on me. My pistol's in the truck." He started forward but Parker held out a hand.

"Hold it right where you are. Put out your hands."

"What?"

"Ezekiel!" Nettie protested. "Just what do you think you're doing?"

Parker ignored his cousin. He kept his attention on Fogelman as he pulled a pair of cuffs from the back of his Sam Browne belt. "You're under arrest for withholding evidence and accessory before and after the fact. Of murder," he added.

Fogelman waited patiently while Parker snapped the cuffs on him, then walked beside the sheriff to the waiting car.

In the county complex, the two men sat across from each other, a scarred table between them.

"Ran that number," Sheriff Parker said. "Matches your old badge number."

"Badge numbers get reassigned after retirement."

"Guy who has that badge number now is fresh out of your academy, sounds like he's all of twenty-three years old and he hasn't left Michigan in two years."

Fogelman leaned back. "How long you plan to hold me?"

"How long you plan to hold out on me?"

Fogelman said nothing and Parker walked out of the room. After three minutes he came back in with two coffees. He put one in front of Fogelman, then sat back down.

"Hypothetically speaking," Parker said, "let's say you're back in Detroit, and you have a guy on the hook like I have you. This guy, he used to be a cop, and you like him, but then you find out he's deep into a case you have and he's been jerking you around for two days. What do you do?"

Fogelman smiled, though with only half of his face. Nettie was right—Parker was learning from him. "If I really liked him, if we had history, I'd give him one more chance to come clean. Otherwise I'd book him for murder and try to make the case stick. If he didn't mean much to me, I'd make sure he went down for something, accessory at the very least."

Parker took a sip of coffee and made a face. He waved the cup care-

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fully in Fogelman's direction. "So," he said. "Tell me what you know."

It took awhile to tell the entire story, starting with how he and Barry Gorman worked the Russian Mafia detail, then his fight with Strenko, the time alone in the hospital, getting out to find that Gorman had retired and left town, and his fiancée had vanished without a trace.

That last stopped Parker. "Had to leave some trace. Nobody just disappears."

"Nope. She was gone. Apartment cleaned out, no forwarding address. Just plain left."

Parker started to say something, but closed his mouth and sat back, thoughtful. Finally, he said. "Hypothetically speaking, since you have your private-investigator license here in Texas, I come to you looking for my girlfriend who's just gone missing. I have her social security number for you, driver's license number, date of birth, job history, everything. You telling me you couldn't find her?"

Fogelman took a deep breath and finally admitted to himself that he hadn't looked particularly hard. "We had a conversation a few days before my run-in with Strenko. She wanted me to leave the force."

"You had your twenty years in, why didn't you?"

Fogelman shrugged. "Elise told me she'd been offered a promotion, that she'd have to move if she accepted it. She said she was tired of waiting for me."

"And?"

Fogelman lowered his head and stared into his coffee cup. "The conversation didn't end well."

"You fought."

"The last thing I told her was that I wasn't leaving the force. She had to choose between her job and me. Then I stormed out of her apartment and slammed the door." Fogelman finally looked Parker in the eye. "I never talked to her again."

Parker nodded, and both men sat uncomfortably, each waiting for the other to speak.

Fogelman broke the silence. "I think what I need is to go home, get some sleep, kind of let myself absorb all this, you know." He stood. "Am I still under arrest?"

Parker hesitated. "I was going to keep you here for your own safety. I figured you'd be bull-headed about this."

Fogelman raised his hands in surrender. "Some other time."

"Then you're free to go." Parker stepped aside, but grabbed Fogelman's arm as he passed through the doorway. "Nothing more to tell me, right?"

"Not a thing, Ezekiel," Fogelman said, and walked out into the warm night air. He stopped at his truck, wondering if he should go back inside and tell Parker that Russians were involved in drug smuggling in Port Aransas or that Booker had ID-ed Fogelman's ex-partner as the guy in the RV. The partner who'd had prior deal-

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ings with the Russian Mafia in general and Vladimir Strenko in particular.

No, Parker was too soft. Good cop, but susceptible to being a buddy. Use his first name a couple of times, and he stopped asking the hard questions. Fogelman would be better off without his help.

Once rolling, Fogelman called Rafael. "You tell the cops anything about a Russian involved in Hermie's RV problem?"

"Me talk to the cops? You shitting me?"

"Well, they may figure it out soon. We gotta move. Get some hardware and meet me in New Braunfels, the Iron Pig. We gotta go to Port Aransas."

Once they were on I-37 south of San Antonio, Rafael reached into his duffel bag on the floor and pulled out a Tecate.

Fogelman wrinkled his nose. "You can afford to drink that stuff?"

"Planning on the big bonus you're going to pay me." Rafael took a long swallow and said, "I see the night-vision scope behind the seat. What's the job?"

Fogelman caught Rafael checking the rearview mirror as they left Corpus Christi, moving over the Neuces Bay Causeway. "I see him," Fogelman said. "Been with us for a while."

"Good guy or bad guy?" asked Rafael.

"Dumb guy. I think Parker followed me. Way out of his jurisdiction. He must be alone. If he'd called the state troopers, they'd have enough cars we wouldn't catch on."

Rafael popped another Tecate and Fogelman made a face. "We'd do it smarter in Detroit," Fogelman said as he braked to a stop at a traffic light. "And we don't drink that piss, either."

"I had a Stroh's once," Rafael said. "I almost puked."

There was little cross traffic this time of night, and Fogelman was about to turn on red when a pair of headlights approaching from the left resolved themselves into an RV. On a hunch, he held his foot on the brakes. The islands were a popular tourist attraction, with plenty of RVs year round, and it wasn't likely to be headed his way. Still, it would be better not to have the RV behind him.

The RV sped up as the light turned yellow, and it flashed through the intersection, but not before the sodium vapor light illuminated the cab. "Son of a bitch!" Fogelman yelled. "Get out!"

"What?"

"That was Gorman. I want to follow him and I don't want Parker on my ass. Get out and slow Parker down."

Rafael put his hand on the door lever, but clearly had problems with the orders. "I—"

"He's out of his jurisdiction. I'll pay your bail, and all fines. Help me out here, Rafe."

"Crazy-ass gringo," Rafael said, but he slid out the door and slapped his hand on the roof.

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Fogelman accelerated around the corner. The half-full can of Tecate, which Rafael had left on the floor, spilled and filled the cab with its sickly sweet, fizzy odor. Fogelman hardly noticed as he sped up to catch the RV.

The RV passed through the town and down to the docks. Here there was no traffic. Fogelman held back and turned off his headlights, hoping that Gorman would be too busy driving to notice.

The RV turned right, past a large wooden warehouse, and Fogelman sped up. He stopped at the corner and left the truck, hurrying to the corner of the building and peering carefully down the narrow street. It was a good thing that he did, because the RV was parked about two hundred feet away and Gorman—Fogelman was certain that it was indeed his former partner—was hustling across the street to another warehouse. Gorman fumbled at the door for a moment, then disappeared inside.

Fogelman retrieved the keys from his pickup, waited a minute, then slunk through the shadows to the doorway through which Gorman had vanished.

Fogelman took two steps into the pitch-black warehouse and stopped to let his eyes grow accustomed to the darkness. He sensed, rather than heard, movement behind him, then felt a cold circle of metal on the back of his neck.

"Don't move," said a voice Fogelman hadn't heard in a long time. Fogelman felt a hand expertly frisk him and remove the pistol he carried in a hip holster. "Now lay on the floor, facedown."

Fogelman did, then said, "Know who I am, Barry?"

"Yeah, that's why you're not dead."

"So this is where you came after quitting Detroit, eh?"

"Not directly. It took me awhile to get over you."

"Took me awhile too, Barry. Would have been nice if you'd visited your partner in the hospital."

"Let's cut the crap. I know why you're looking for me."

"Wasn't looking for you. Didn't know until a few hours ago that you were even in Texas. It's Strenko I want."

"You and me both. Bastard got away twice now. It won't happen again." As if in response, the warehouse lights came on with a muted thump.

After pitch darkness, even facing the floor, Fogelman's eyes watered uncontrollably. Gorman must be blinded.

"Toss the gun away, Gorman." Parker? Had Rafael been unable to delay Parker after all? Fogelman had no issue with that just now.

Gorman's feet shifted on the floor, but Fogelman still could not see a thing. Evidently Gorman couldn't either, because the clatter of metal on the concrete floor came to Fogelman's ears.

"Better," said the voice. It was familiar. Not Parker, though . . .

"Vladimir," said Gorman and Fogelman simultaneously.

"In person."

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Fogelman's eyes were now becoming accustomed to the light. A tall, cadaverously thin man carrying a long-barreled automatic pistol in his left hand walked around in front where he lay. It could be Strenko, or half of the Strenko he used to know. This man couldn't weigh one hundred fifty pounds. His right arm hung limply.

Strenko looked directly at Fogelman. "Surprised, yes? I found the best disguise was to shave my face and lose half my weight. I am confused with younger man, American basketball player, as long as I don't talk, yes?"

"Who were you hiding from?"

"Who was I not? So much you don't know. My Russian brothers were not pleased with me after you lived, and my American brother here has been looking for me. And what do I do? Like a fat goose I simply walk into him. I spent seven years being places that he and my enemies in the Russian mafia would not be, what you call tourist traps. But it becomes a Strenko trap, no? Suddenly there is Brother Gorman in my RV and I am lucky to be alive."

Strenko's voice pitched higher as he spoke. He might be feverish from his stab wound, or he might be working himself into hysteria, but either way he was getting close to the edge, and Fogelman knew his window to act was rapidly closing.

Fogelman noted the bulky bandage on the palm of the hand holding the gun. Might slow Strenko just a tic in getting a shot off. Fogelman shifted imperceptibly, drawing his arms closer to his body. When the time came, he wanted to be able to move.

Strenko smiled. "I heard what you said to Brother Gorman just as I turned on the lights. I wish I had waited. I wish to hear Gorman explain why he set you up."

Feet scraped behind Fogelman and suddenly Strenko's pistol was aimed at where Fogelman imagined Gorman to be. When Strenko's eyes were diverted, Fogelman made his move, drawing his legs tight then pushing off, exploding upward in one fluid motion.

He didn't come close. A three-shot burst from Strenko's pistol caught him on the right side and he fell back. A single crack of a small-caliber pistol followed and a body fell on top of him.

Fogelman felt no pain, but couldn't move his left arm or leg. He tried to shift, to see where Strenko was. When he moved, he saw an automatic pistol on the floor about five feet away. Strenko's pistol. "Barry?" Fogelman twisted under Strenko's body and Barry Gorman came into view.

Strenko moved and Gorman shifted the pistol in his direction. "Don't move," he said. "Just talk. Where is the videotape?"

"You had a gun in your sleeve." Fogelman heard admiration in Strenko's voice.

"Yeah," Gorman said. "Just like you showed me in Detroit. You and your sleeve guns—you always were a paranoid bastard. So paranoid you couldn't trust me and had to tape me."

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Fogelman turned his head, releasing a little of the pressure on his arm at the same time. "What tape?"

"I made a tape to protect myself from Brother Gorman, and it turned into a weapon against me. I shoud have realized that Gorman could not allow that tape to exist." Strenko's voice was weaker, and Fogelman felt something wet running from Strenko's chest onto his neck. Strenko's blood, most likely. If Strenko had taken a chest shot, he'd be dead soon.

"Cut the shit," said Gorman. "Where's the tape?"

"The joke is on you. You have killed the only person who could tell you." Strenko tried to say more, but suddenly became a dead weight on Fogelman.

A booted foot kicked Strenko, but elicited no response. Gorman walked around until he came into Fogelman's view. "What about you? You have the tape?"

"It was you, wasn't it? You killed Elise."

"I thought you were on to me, thought Strenko told you about me and the Russkies. Elise wouldn't talk. The bitch was loyal to the end. I didn't have a choice."

"Bastard."

"We looked for Strenko for a long time. The Russkies wanted him more than I did. Attacking you brought them too much publicity."

"I'll kill you, Gorman."

"I don't think so. Strenko says he just happened to be here but I doubt it was a coincidence that you both ended up in the same state as me. I think you and Strenko were working together."

"Until a few days ago I had pushed Detroit out of my mind," Fogelman said. "The last thing I wanted was to think about my life before Texas."

"Liar, I did some checking on you. You and your sheriff friend and your girlfriend. Have to guess that she has the tape, huh?"

Gorman turned and walked off. Fogelman worked his left arm free and tried to push Strenko off. Gorman whirled and aimed his pistol. "Say goodnight, Vladimir," he said and fired two rounds into the body.

He looked at Fogelman. "I'd like to leave you here to think about your girlfriend dying, but you're such a stubborn bastard. You might get to a phone. Say goodnight, Dave." He fired two rounds at Fogelman and turned on his heel. He walked quickly out of the building.

Fogelman felt a shock when the bullets slammed into Strenko's body but no pain, as Strenko acted as a shield. He heard Gorman's footsteps and waited for him to finish the job.

But the footsteps grew fainter and the warehouse door creaked open. Fogelman waited a moment then pushed Strenko's surprisingly heavy arm aside and tried to rise. Fogelman was hurt, but considered himself lucky.

The warehouse door suddenly reopened and Gorman returned.

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Fogelman was caught in motion. "Good thing I learned paranoia from the best," Gorman said. He walked toward Fogelman, pistol at the ready.

Fogelman made a last effort to rise. Strenko's arm fell back and struck Fogelman in the face. It was too heavy. It . . . Strenko still carried a sleeve gun. Some things never change. Fogelman reached his good hand up and grabbed Strenko's arm, probing for the hideout holster. He fumbled with the cloth. How to get at the gun? He could feel the mechanism strapped to Strenko's wrist, but . . . Fogelman pushed, pulled, pressed, and finally a .38-caliber revolver popped out.

Fogelman caught it and aimed in one movement. Gorman, taken by surprise, stared just a tick before firing. In that time, Fogelman fired twice, hitting Gorman at least once. Fogelman pulled the trigger again and again, stopping only when he heard the clicks of the hammer hitting spent cartridges.

Again the warehouse door opened. This time Rafael and Parker ran in. Parker had a gun drawn and ready.

Fogelman awoke in a hospital, again. He was alone, again, but before he could even think about the significance of it, Rafael came in.

"You owe me, man," he said.

"Huh. I thought I told you to keep Parker from following me."

"Wasn't Parker following us. Was that skinny Russian dude. He duct-taped me, man. Too tight. Thought I might lose my hands. They were swollen like grapefruits."

He held them up for evidence, but they looked normal to Fogelman. Rafael continued, "He threw me down in the ditch, but I rolled myself back up on the road. Two cars almost ran over me before Parker stopped."

"Parker?" Fogelman said. "But there was only one car following us. If that was Strenko, how did Parker know where we were?"

"Easy," said Parker from the doorway. "I stuck a GPS transmitter under y'all's truck."

Rafael shifted from one foot to the other, apparently nervous in Parker's presence. "I got to go, man."

He gave Fogelman's shoulder a squeeze, then pushed out of the door past Parker.

Parker pulled a chair next to Fogelman's bed and straddled it backward, resting his arms on the chair's back. "I know you're hurt," he said, "but there's no good time to tell you this."

Fogelman closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He knew when a cop was about to give bad news.

"That girlfriend of yours in Detroit," Parker said, "she took the promotion. While you were saying your prayers in that Detroit warehouse, a moving company was emptying her apartment."

Fogelman kept his eyes closed. "Yeah?"

"They held her stuff in a Chicago warehouse for three years

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before they sold it to a salvage company. She never showed up for her new job."

Fogelman had barely finished assembling the Thunderbolt when he saw the sheriff's car turn onto his dirt road, the sheriff behind the wheel and Nettie in the passenger seat. He took a chamois cloth and buffed the new paint on the fuselage.

Parker immediately saw Nettie's name on the Thunderbolt in shiny new paint, and pretended to need something in the trunk. He stayed out of sight for a couple of minutes after Nettie's exclamation of joy.

Nettie nearly knocked Fogelman over with a running hug. Over her shoulder, Fogelman saw Parker and they exchanged smiles. Nettie broke off the hug to look at the plane again. "I've never had anything named after me. This is so sweet."

She cocked her head, staring at the Thunderbolt. *"Nimble Nettie,"* she said. "I like it, but why the pinup picture? Flattering though it may be."

"In World War Two, airmen painted names of their girlfriends or movie stars on their planes, and often had pinup pictures. They named their planes, too, and except for the P-38, the Thunderbolt was as nimble as any plane we had."

Nettie picked up the radio controller. "Can I fly it?"

"Sure, but let me get it into the air for you."

Once the plane was safely flying over the lake, Fogelman handed her the controls. "Cut her some slack," he said. "Sometimes she wavers a bit, but she always comes back on line."

He didn't plan to lose this one.●

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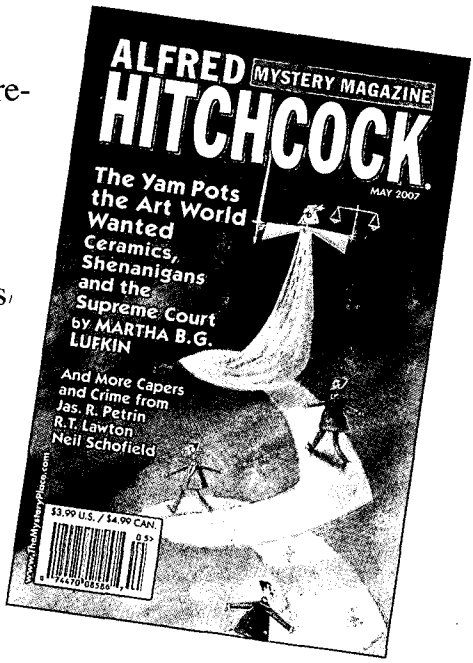

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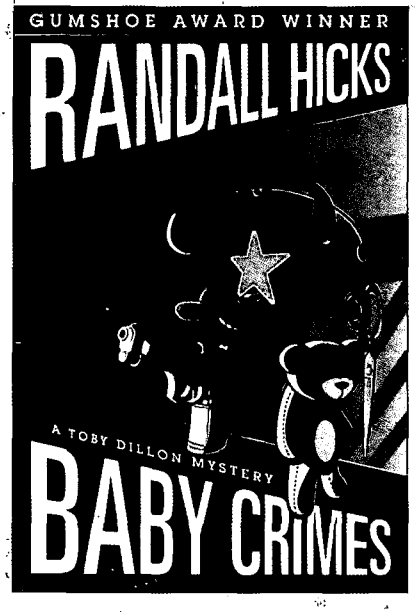

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